

Dianne White Oyler

HISTOIR DES MANDINGUES

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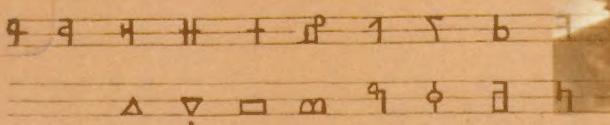
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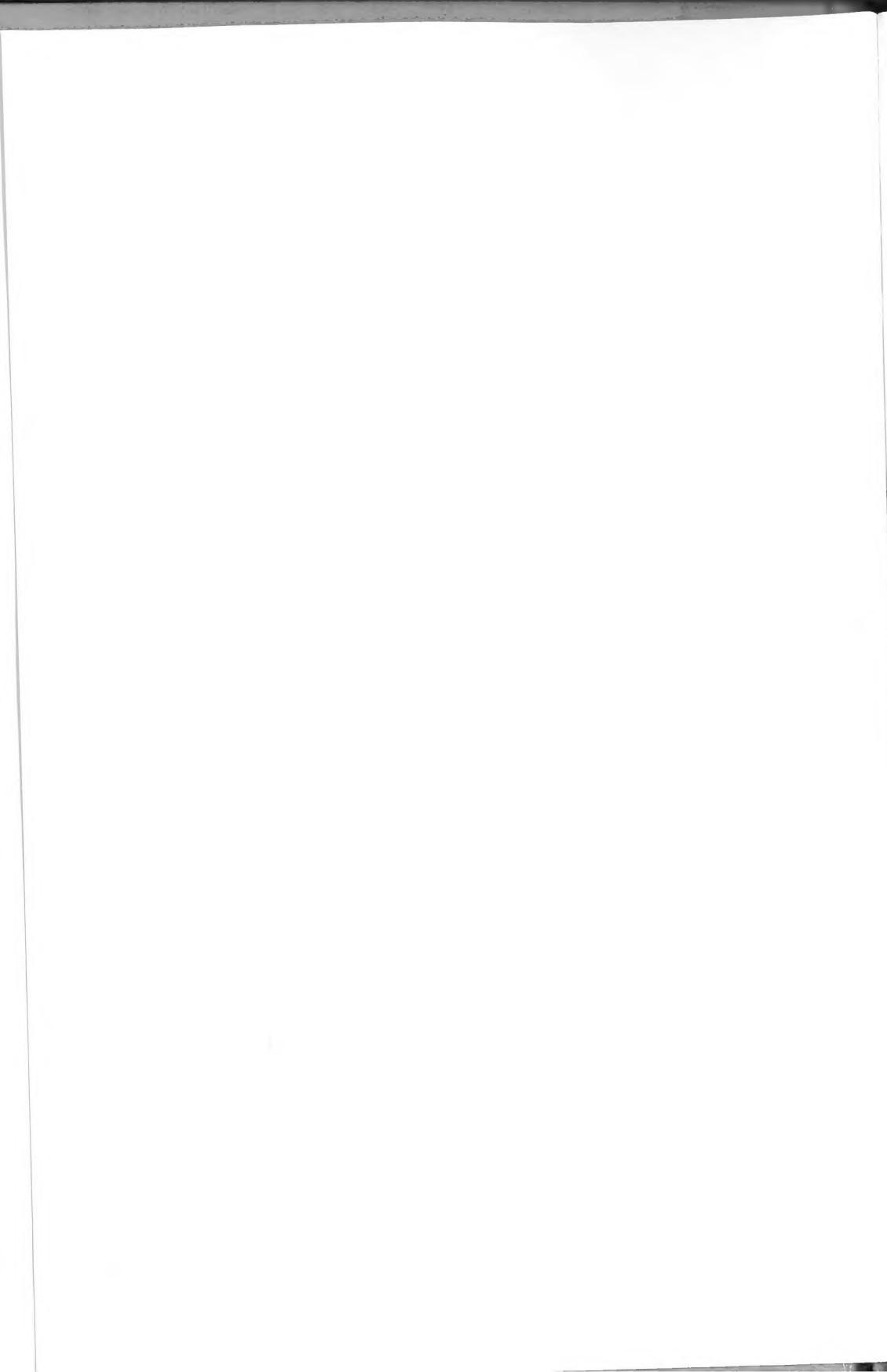
The History of the N'ko Alphabet and its Role in Mande Transnational Identity *Words as Weapons*

†	B	1	ڻ	ٻ	F
R	D	TY	DY	T	P B
ra	da	tya	dya	ta	pa ba

△	ڦ	ڻ	ڻ	ڻ	ڻ	ڻ
M	L	K	F	GB	S	RR
-ma	la	ka	fa	gba	sa	

ڻ	ڻ	ڻ	ڻ	ڻ	ڻ	ڻ
M'N'	y	w	h	n	ny	
m'n'	ya	wa	ha	na	nya	





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Words as Weapons



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For all those who say N'ko

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Foreword

When Dianne White Oyler started documenting the oral history of the *N'ko* alphabet in Guinea, West Africa in 1991, she had no intention of uncovering a literacy, grassroots movement intertwined with the oral history of a Mande intellectual named Souleymane Kanté. In fact, she had no idea that her initial research, done to write her dissertation for the African History Program at the University of Florida, would control her life as a historian as much as it has. But like many other researchers who study a specific movement in order to show its beginning, middle, and end, she has discovered that the story of *N'ko* is an ongoing one; so far, its history has had no end.

Oyler's great accomplishment has been to recognize the multilayered aspect of *N'ko*'s history and to accept the task of fleshing out its complexity. Read along with many of the standard accounts of Mande history, together with the oral tales, such as Sundiata's, which have become part and parcel of freshman history books and world literature anthologies, this book documents the transnational dimension of Mande culture at the present time as no other study has.

Furthermore, because of her meticulous field research of the *N'ko* topic, which she has pursued through several countries of West Africa, Oyler has also uncovered a period of Mande Enlightenment associated with the life and works of Souleymane Kanté, to whom she aptly applies the epithet of "vernacular intellectual," thereby expanding the thesis of Africa's *Peasant Intellectuals* which is developed and documented in Steven Feierman's book with that title to include those non-European, urban intellectuals who, like Kanté, sought to preserve the knowledge of the peasant intellectuals by recording it for posterity.

As one reads Oyler's *History of the N'ko Alphabet*, what comes to life is its human subject Souleymane Kanté, whose story indeed shows that the pen is mightier than the sword. Reconstructing his tale through interviews of people who knew him, as she traces the spread of the *N'ko* movement, Oyler paints a marvelous picture of a thinker-tinkerer of language. Kanté first invents an alphabet able to reproduce the different tonalities of the Mande languages and then generates by himself numerous original books and translations of books—including grammars, dictionaries, histories, pharmacopeias, and the Quran—in order to set out on the quixotic quest of teaching everyone he meets how to read and write in *N'ko*. In fact, Kanté is so driven by this task that he is successful in devising and energizing the first massive, grassroots, literacy campaign in Africa. To date, *N'ko* proselytes have

become so numerous that they have been able to implement his literacy program far and wide, for N'ko associations and schools have been established in the countries of Guinea, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, the Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, and Egypt, and the number of books that have been published in N'ko script exceed the quarter million mark.

Contributing to the history of ideas, *History of the N'ko Alphabet* also documents a variant to the paradigm of Pan-Africanism whose outgrowth stems from acquiring literacy in African languages. Conceptually, the author describes an atmosphere where actors who are literate in N'ko make use of it for writing the Mande languages in order to identify the self and to define their position within social, political, and cultural spaces. This process, according to Oyler, is quite complex since it entails enhancing Mande allegiance to a historical-mythical culture rather than to a specific nation state, and thus the process implies a reversal of colonial influence—particularly in the area of language usage—and a return to a pre-colonial affirmation of identity when the Mande indeed ruled vast areas of West Africa.

It is quite likely that had Oyler not documented all of this oral history while those people who knew Souleymane Kanté were still alive, the story of N'ko and its founder would have been lost. Their recollections convey a sense of the speakers of Mande languages and their rich intellectual culture in their own word. The analysis of the views and ideas of this community is Oyler's contribution to the study of African history.

Arnold Odio, Ph.D.
Albany State University

Chapter 1

Introduction

As if such monumental endeavor can be reduced to one day, Souleymane Kanté is credited with inventing the N'ko alphabet on April 14, 1949.¹ Its purpose was to provide a truly indigenous written form for Mande languages. Since its invention the alphabet has acquired a life of its own. A grassroots movement promoting literacy by using the N'ko alphabet has blossomed across West Africa from Gambia to Nigeria, wherever there are speakers of Mande languages, despite the fact that these countries use French and English as official languages. Islam is the dominant religion in much of the region. Although Mande-speaking Muslim religious leaders use Arabic and its script for studying and teaching, Mande speakers have acquired N'ko literacy in what seems an attempt to gain control over maternal language knowledge. Thus, the number of various people who are literate in N'ko has systematically increased from the colonial through independence periods without government intervention or without support from Islamic religious communities. Why is this phenomenon still occurring? N'ko is spreading at the grassroots level because it is practical and, more importantly, because it has allowed speakers of Mande languages to write and to cultivate and to take pride in their cultural heritage; informants from the city of Kankan and its vicinity, one small area of the vast region of N'ko's spread, emphasize that their motivation to learn the alphabet is pride in their culture.²

Souleymane Kanté's linguistic effort is the seed grown into a movement. The Mande are a group of people whose members use indigenous language and the heroic and historic past of Mande speakers as the basis for their unity. Their ancestors who lived within the mythical "Mande Heartland" (roughly a region the size of France) later spread in a diaspora across West Africa. Kanté's effort has further unified this disparate group of speakers of Mande languages by allowing them an easier access to their cultural heritage.

Like a good revolutionary, Souleymane Kanté deploys intellectual knowledge through the use of the technology of literacy. His work has led to a cultural revolution designed to dismantle foreign cultural domination and also to create a Mande Renaissance state. In one scene from Bob Fosse's movie *Lenny*, a character reveals that the satirist Lenny Bruce used "words ... as weapons." This statement about Lenny Bruce could also be made about the human subject of this book, for the book will detail the odyssey of one man, Souleymane Kanté, whose lifelong task became using words to recapture and to preserve in an alphabet of his

own creation the totality of knowledge available to speakers of Mande languages. However, unlike Lenny Bruce whose words often assaulted those he addressed, the words Kanté generated in his N'ko alphabet were weapons of defense to be used by those whose culture was being assailed by European languages and cultures. The written word became Kante's weapon, and universal literacy for the speakers of Mande languages his goal. This was indeed a quixotic goal, and like Sancho Panza at the end of *Don Quixote*, the followers of Kanté and the practitioners of N'ko have accepted the idea of righting European wrongs. Thus, the grassroots movement has kept on growing because of its affirmation of the heroic past.

One colonial paradigm which offers that sub-Saharan Africans were not and could not be considered literate because African languages had no indigenous writing systems is viewed as a fallacy today. The N'ko alphabet demonstrates one case where Africans developed their own educational practices and achieved literacy by themselves. N'ko offers evidence against colonial paradigms that have conceptualized the spread of literacy in Africa. Furthermore, while many historians have analyzed the deep cultural impact of western schooling and of Islamic education in Africa, this study differs from such works in that it offers the first full-scale examination of an indigenous writing system and, particularly, the flourishing of the associated educational institutions, thus documenting an African attempt to place cultural initiative back into African hands.

The present inquiry into N'ko also provides a detailed account of its creation and dissemination. It analyzes the sociopolitical context under which N'ko was created, investigates its inventor's motives, his commitment to literacy, and speculates about his rationale for the selection of texts to be transmitted in N'ko. The study also revisits the subject of indigenous literacy in West Africa and theorizes about the social uses of literacy and its transnational dissemination. Moreover, it describes a people's control over their own language and literacy. Finally, it explores the N'ko literacy movement as a seminal form of the Pan Africanism that has permeated the twentieth century.

Because of the contemporary nature of the N'ko literacy movement, however, one cannot assess its long term results or full implications. Much of the information presented herein concerning the initial development and spread of N'ko, specifically the literacy movement from 1949 to 1986, bears a further and more thorough investigation in the towns and cities identified in this study. Nevertheless, the information on the N'ko literacy campaign from 1986 to the present establishes the events surrounding its inception and the events that have occurred in the present. But a thorough assessment of the literacy movement and its resultant

literacy campaign will still require a future investigation. To this end, I conducted literacy surveys of Kankan in 1994 and 2000 in order to build a statistical base for further study.

With regard to terminology, this study uses *Mande speaker* to serve as an umbrella term embracing all members of the community of speakers of Mande languages. Furthermore, the term *Maninka* denotes the local language of Haute-Guinée, the area in which the N'ko alphabet originated and from which it was disseminated.

Issues surrounding decolonization

African scholars have struggled with issues of political, economic, and cultural decolonization since African independence. While independence should signal the deconstruction of colonial domination, it has been really impossible for African nations to achieve total deconstruction of colonial influence and control. Hence, the notion of independent African nations reinventing themselves has been an elusive one. After 40 years of independence, decolonization is still a major issue of concern for many African intellectuals.

While in the political sphere African nations have gained their independence, the conceptualization of the nation state into which they were framed was a European construct and not an African one. In order to be granted separation from the colonizing country, African nations had to acquiesce to certain restrictions. First, they had to accept the formal boundaries set by the European countries at the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885. These boundaries arbitrarily divided ethnic groups such as the community of Vai speakers who were divided between Liberia and Sierra Leone. The Berlin Conference also created pluralistic societies by forcing rival ethnic groups to live within the confines of one nation state such as did happen in modern day Nigeria which houses at least 250 ethnic groups—the 3 major ones being the Hausa speakers of northern Nigeria, the Yoruba speakers of western Nigeria, and the Igbo speakers of eastern Nigeria. European domination did not allow Africans to group themselves together as they saw fit, but instead forced them to accept the western model of a nation state. Unfortunately, the leaders of the newly independent African governments were often neither educated or barely trained in running nation states nor did they have any lengthy period of experience in decision making while operating their governments. Consequently, since independence African states have had governmental systems that often do not seem to reflect indigenous ideas about governance; therefore, these governmental systems have lacked stability. Ghana, for example, had less than 10 years to learn the lessons of governance while Zaire (now called the Democratic Republic of the Congo) had fewer than 6 months.

In the economic sector African political independence did not change the economy. Under colonial tutelage African nations provided raw materials and mineral wealth to the West. Colonizing nations developed their charges economically for their own economic benefit by encouraging all of their colonies to compete among themselves for sales of the same products. African nations have never recovered from what has been called their underdevelopment. Today, for example, Kenyans who produce coffee for the global market are competing with coffee producers worldwide for sales. Unfortunately, overproduction by Third World producers in competition with one another drives the price down for growers of this commodity. Underdevelopment has created African nations who only produce raw materials and supply mineral wealth for industrialized nations, and thus they remain poor because of their inability to break into the global economy at the technological or industrial level. But even if African nations were to gain today the necessary technology to become industrialized, they still could not compete in price of the items produced with the industrialized nations.

Within the cultural sphere, political independence has not given African nations an ability to return to their African languages as a method for socialization of the young or for religion; so African nations still accept European languages and their writing systems as their official means of communication. Furthermore, they still use the mode of the European school system and its curriculum in the socialization of the younger generations. This in turn has caused a brain drain of people who have become proficient in western technology. However, perhaps the cultural sphere may be the one in which greater progress can be made. As a result, the current study will also focus on the language and literacy occurring in an indigenous language writing system which is being transmitted through a grassroots movement that uses an indigenous methodology for education. While this phenomenon is not in itself a decolonization process, it does represent an initial step by one group in the process of defining Africa culturally in African terms.

The sources

The literature of the N'ko literacy movement is limited. David Dalby recorded evidence of the alphabet's existence in 1969, and he offered a visual representation of what he calls the "Manding" alphabet.³ (See Chart 2.) Dalby also identified its author as Souleymane Kanté and situated its use in Mali, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire. Although Dalby did interview a Malian who was literate in N'ko, he was unable to meet with Kanté or others who may have had information pertaining to the invention and

L	ə	Y	A	U	ɔ	ɛ	ɜ	b	ʒ	ʃ	ɪ	ə	ɪ	ʊ					
ah	ey	ee	eh	oo	oh	aw	b	p	t	j	z	ch	d	r	rr				
s	á	í	é	ú	ó	é	í	g	g	g	ó	g	g	g	dy				
s	sh	gb	hard g	f	v	k	l	m	ny	n	b	w	y	"nnnn"	x				
t	p	j	c	t	ç	v	t	θ	θ	θ	d	ð	ð	ð	ð				
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20

Chart 1. The N'ko alphabet and numerals. Source: Communication by SIM missionaries. The organization retained the acronym, that originally meant Sudan Inland Missions, after its scope extended to other areas of Africa.

CONSONANTS						VOWELS			DIACRITICS		
b	F	s	ç	a	i	(examples with a)					
p	q	k	H	e	o	nasalized vowel (ñ)			!		
t	b	l	ɸ	ɪ	Y	short vowel (a):					
dʒ	ɛ	m	△	ɔ	ʌ	with "voix haute ordinaire"			|		
ty	ð	ny	q	ii	U	"voix haute brusque"			T		
d	aa	n	ŋ	o	ɔ	"voix basse ordinaire"			|		
r	†	h	ɳ	ɔ	ø	"voix basse brusque"			|		
s	□	w	曰			long vowel (aa):			long		
gb	▽	y	ø			with "voix haute ordinaire"			↑		
NUMERALS						"voix haute brusque"			↑		
1 1 2 4 3 5 4 2 5 7 6 3 2 1 4 7 9 9 10 01						"voix basse ordinaire"			↓		
						"voix basse brusque"			↓		

Chart 2. The N'ko alphabet, tabular format. Source: David Dalby, "Further Indigenous Scripts of West Africa: Manding, Wolof, and Fula Alphabets and Yoruba 'Holy' Writing," *African Language Studies*, 10, 1969, p. 164.

dissemination of the alphabet because at that time the Sékou Touré administration had restricted foreign scholars' access to Guinea.

While Kanté invented the N'ko alphabet during the period of colonial domination, I have been unable to find any mention of the alphabet in either official or unofficial administrative reports. Documents from Sékou Touré's First Republic have not been catalogued and were also unavailable for scrutiny. A 1980s United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report on Guinea's maternal language learning project does discuss the alphabet, however.⁴ While Christian missionaries in post-colonial Guinea had translated the New Testament into the Maninka language using the Roman alphabet, I have learned that they are now writing their translations in the Maninka language written in the N'ko alphabet because of the results of my 1994 literacy survey of Kankan.⁵ (See Appendix F.)

Since I have been unable to document the existence of the alphabet in the more conventional historical manner of using written primary sources, it has been necessary to rely heavily upon African informants for the information concerning the alphabet's origin and its dissemination. This study, therefore, uses the oral histories of Maninka speakers residing in Kankan. I interviewed the family of Souleymane Kanté and the supporters of N'ko. (See Appendix B.) However, 50 percent of the interviewees were non-supporters of the alphabet; others had not even heard of the alphabet.

Specific information concerning the alphabet itself, however, mostly came from supporters, teachers, or students involved with the N'ko literacy movement. I observed their dedication to promoting literacy in the N'ko alphabet, and I witnessed several individuals investing their meager financial resources in the promotion and teaching of the alphabet. At times, I was amazed by their commitment to learning: teachers and students were striving toward literacy after a hard day's work or after school under very difficult conditions. People connected to N'ko were enthusiastic about the alphabet because (as they often expressed) N'ko literacy provided an opportunity to acquire and use knowledge. Often they showed their enthusiasm by always carrying books published in N'ko, and they repeatedly demonstrated its value by sharing the knowledge contained therein with those around them. Many practitioners of N'ko did belong to the organization that officially promotes the alphabet, *L'Association pour l'Impulsion et la Coordination des Recherches sur l'Alphabet N'ko* (ICRA-N'KO). Nevertheless, proponents of the alphabet were not the only ones who exuded enthusiasm for N'ko. Community members with whom I spoke also expressed admiration for its inventor and for the alphabet itself and its promotion.

Unaware of David Dalby's observations about N'ko, many members of ICRA-N'KO were pleased that I had an interest in the alphabet. I am thankful that they have embraced my work as a vehicle which disseminates the biography of Souleymane Kanté, his invention of N'ko, and N'ko's characteristics as a grassroots, transnational, literacy movement. It did seem to them that my interest in the alphabet confers upon it value in the eyes of the local community. As an outsider to African culture, I have struggled in this study to find a voice with which to tell the history of the Maninka speakers and the writers and teachers of the N'ko alphabet who are currently engaged in a cultural revolution. They are the ones, however, disseminating the knowledge of Kanté's creation and his alphabet and documents, and this is the grassroots literacy campaign which has spread across West Africa. Thus, I will try to manifest in my writing their enthusiasm about N'ko. Becoming literate in N'ko is contagious. In Kankan those who were literate in N'ko as well as those who were not supported my research of the data, one reason being that they considered the events to be important to their local history. Almost all of those I contacted offered hospitality, shared their stories, and opened their personal archives.

Oral history

Writing history from oral sources necessitates discerning the accuracy of the information gathered because lacking written documentation, one cannot check data. When doing oral history, data can only be checked by counterpointing the memories of informants. One particular problem is that some of the informants have at times discussed the data with one another and thus have formulated a collective memory. While some informants may recall facts with precision, often their recollections are limited because these are confined to their personal interpretation of the events. However, reminiscences are valuable because they tell us about the context of the alphabet's invention and dissemination and also the people's understanding of it. Furthermore, with regard to the intention of the alphabet's inventor, personal reminiscences do convey what informants remember Souleymane Kanté told them and also what others have said. For this study, data that have been corroborated by two or more informants provide the substantive documentation for the research.

Another difficulty with relying on oral narratives has to do with the process of remembering. Many of Kanté's contemporaries who were interviewed suffered from the vagaries of old age which at times seemed to cloud memories of the past. This study also faces the problems created by translations because elderly informants have mostly related their stories in the Maninka language whose words have a specific cultural context.

Moreover, reminiscences in this study were translated and transcribed into French by college-age assistants who may not have understood the full cultural context of the informant's language. The problem is that while the informant offers his own contemporary knowledge of the past, the modern language interpreter may affect to a certain degree the data collected. Despite these obvious problems of doing oral history, Souleymane Kanté and his development of the N'ko alphabet is quite valuable; it fills a vacuum with information that would otherwise be lost. Kanté's intellectual struggle is a historical reconstruction authenticated by people who knew him well. Souleymane Kanté died of diabetes in 1987.



Souleymane Kanté's burial site is his natal home, Soumankoyin-Kölönin, Haute-Guinée. Photographer, Dianne White Oyler, taken April 21, 1993.

Literacy as an extension of language

It has been said that language is the core component of cultural identity; it forms the culture as well as the culture informs it. Literacy, the written form of language, records and sets its cultural identity. Kanté created N'ko in order to record and set a valuable corpus of knowledge for speakers of Mande languages. However, according to informants, his goal seems to have been greater because he wanted the speakers of Mande languages to achieve literacy in N'ko, his own writing system.

In 1957 UNESCO described literacy as an indistinct continuum of abilities.⁶ Jeanne Chall has established three stages of literacy which di-

vide the continuum according to the reader's skills. At stage one (the least literate) the reader learns initial decoding; at stage two the reader gains fluency by reading texts which are already familiar; at stage three the reader reads to learn new ideas.⁷ Most researchers use the term *literacy* to mean functional literacy which occurs when people read for ideas that they in turn apply to new contexts. UNESCO defines persons as being literate if they can read and write and understand a short simple statement related to everyday life.⁸ Others, however, may see *literacy* as the ability to use the written word as a means of communication. It has been pointed out that perhaps *literacy* is an altogether inappropriate term that should be replaced with *alphabetism*.⁹ This term is already widely used in French-speaking countries where literacy is discussed in terms of *alphabétisation*.

The concept of literacy is also an ever-changing social tool which has evolved over time. The stated goal of most governments today is to have 100 percent functional literacy for their citizens. Before the sixteenth century in Europe, literacy was limited to an educated elite, and the clergy controlled it through the Latin language. An ampler "culture of the book" emerged in Europe as a direct result of the Protestant Reformation, and the invention of the moveable type printing press gave rise to a print industry which provided vernacular Christian texts. During this period literacy was demonstrated by reading the Bible and the works of the Protestant reformers from texts which in earlier periods had been memorized. Lawrence Stone observes that "God's people were to be a literate people taking in God's Word from the printed page."¹⁰ Jeanne Chall points out that reading the Bible and other religious texts which had previously been committed to memory occurs at the second stage of literacy.¹¹ Today, as did Christians of the sixteenth century, many non-Arabic speakers in Islamic societies demonstrate stage two literacy by reading memorized texts such as the Quran.

Inherent to the character of literacy is the process of communication within and among communities, because literacy does not consist solely of controlling the mechanics of reading and writing. Rather, it also encompasses the cultural context of what is read or what is being written—that is, the pool of knowledge which a community shares.^{12,13} A shared general knowledge enables the literate community to deal with new ideas, events, and challenges.¹⁴ In addition, the community's institutions also define the social context of literacy.¹⁵ In particular these communities include the schools which are responsible for the acculturation of youth to their social and political responsibilities.¹⁶ It is obvious that literacy helps people to exert better control over their lives and to rationalize

decision making; literacy gives people an equal power in transforming social relations.¹⁷

Whereas spoken language represents the acquisition of knowledge and skills from the direct communication and interaction of personal experience, literacy represents a consumption of information which is indirect and is mediated through written language. In both cases, known knowledge and unknown knowledge are brought together. Although literacy is only intended to supplement the personal interactions of experience, the reading of books has vicariously replaced field experience in education.¹⁸ Consequently, achieving literacy has become a necessity of modern life.¹⁹ The ability to read and write is essential for successful employment, upward social mobility, achievement of personal goals, and political and social stability.

One can also observe that the function of literacy in society is based upon the varieties of reading and writing activities available to ordinary people under ordinary circumstances.²⁰ Adults read and write at different levels for many types of social purposes. As a result, literacy may provide information about the practical problems of daily life, deliver information pertinent to social relations, distribute information about local and distant events, support attitudes or ideas, record pertinent information, serve as an aid to memory, or else become a substitute for oral messages. A "Literacy Event" is any occasion when any type of written information is central to comprehension, to interaction, and to interpretation of the text by a literate reader or a group of readers.²¹

Although at one point language discourses among interest groups may be negotiated from positions of equality, the variety of literate discourse allows for cultural manipulation and thus for a resulting cultural inequality. Particular forms of language and literacy may lose their autonomy so that some may move into positions of advantage and become dominant while others are lost except to lexicographers. In the case of Africa's colonial period, the dominant group consisted of members of an outside culture who imposed their specific form of language and literacy as a part of their political domination.²² Thus, their dominant discourse, promoted by an emergent state bureaucracy, mediated the divergent discourses of cultural pluralism within the confines of the nation state. In that process the state develops an official (or state-sanctioned) elite culture that represents the goals of the state's ruling groups, and this is the dominant culture, which is the one also described in the public transcript. Nevertheless, juxtaposed to the dominant group's official transcript is the unofficial culture of the subordinate interest groups who are not accepted into the official culture.²³ The relationship between the

dominant and subordinate interest groups occurs within the social relations of class, gender, race and ethnicity, culture, and age.²⁴

Social and cultural literacy, however, do not reflect only the interests of the dominant group because dominant group goals and values often evolve from the cultural struggle between the dominant and subordinate interest groups. However, it is the dominant group's intellectuals who assert a national culture based on a national language through the state-sponsored educational system; this is done based on the idea that a national culture and national language are needed for nation building.²⁵ Therefore, nations regularly provide compulsory education, and at the elementary level, they create a pool of loyal, literate citizens who can be drafted into the military or employed in the government's bureaucracy. Thus, literacy can be used to manipulate the existing relations among interest groups because in order to retain its controlling position, a dominant group may provide a subordinate group with an inferior education so that the subordinate one is unprepared for the cultural contest; instead the subordinate group may accept implicit messages about the dominant group's superiority.^{26,27}

For the subordinate interest groups, literacy also constitutes the "language of possibilities" because literacy offers the potential for bringing about change.²⁸ There is always a tension between literacy as an instrument of social control and literacy as a vehicle of liberation.²⁹ Students from subordinated cultures can employ selected knowledge contained in the dominant discourse to empower themselves and to restructure social relations. Moreover, literacy gives students access to the knowledge available beyond what the dominant interest group is willing to provide in its pre-packaged, pre-determined and pre-established discourse.³⁰ Literacy empowers subordinate groups whose culture has been marginalized by education, mass media, and economic production to reclaim their cultural identity.³¹

Literacy in the colonies

In the case of the colonies, governments representing foreign national cultures did establish administrative control over previously independent African cultures. Under the umbrella of colonialism, governments imposed their foreign national metropolitan culture on pluralistic communities. The colonial government became the dominant interest group, and it relegated diverse African ethnicities to the role of being subordinate interest groups. Their method was to use state-sponsored education to redesign a national culture in its own image and also to impose a European language. Colonizers have spent centuries trying to convince

Africans to choose a European language; popularly, they had considered African languages too “ugly” by western standards. One result is that many leaders of the independence period were influenced by linguistic assimilation and colonization.³²

Colonial education reinforced the rights of Europeans to govern by insidiously limiting the numbers of students eligible for language and literacy and also by limiting the content of their education.³³ “Colonial schools introduced class, gender, and racial inequalities,” which were later promulgated by Africans themselves as the educational structure inculcated Africans with beliefs that demeaned their language, culture, and history.^{34,35} Because the school system became the key institution by which the colonial state controlled society, governments constantly changed the process of regulating class, race and ethnicity, gender, age, and locations.³⁶ The legacy of colonial education can be perceived as being a de-Africanization of African peoples.³⁷

Believing in the supremacy of European culture, colonial governments spread literacy in order to inject European values into African cultural identities. Government controlled literacy instilled new assumptions about the value of the written word and thus created profound changes in cultural identity and the social basis of knowledge.³⁸ The process was so gradual and overtly non-threatening that indigenous cultures were not overwhelmed by cultural shock; instead they were debilitated. Colonial governments also made subordinate cultures eminently aware of the dominant culture’s power.³⁹ Seen in this manner, literacy then becomes a part of the much wider process of domination. Its practice in the administration, bureaucracy, and religion consolidated the colonial government’s authority over the subordinate groups. But at times the imposition of a foreign-based culture met with a resistance to becoming literate by many members of each subordinate group.⁴⁰ This act was often a refusal to learn the specific cultural codes and competencies valued by the dominant culture. The teaching of students in a European foreign language in primary school had the effect of being “a brutal rupture of his family life.”⁴¹ Particularly in Francophone Africa, as students advanced through the school system and to jobs in the civil service, French acculturation elevated them to the status of *évolué*, a term defined as a small but important group of Africans devoted to education and acculturation so that they could achieve citizenship and full political rights.⁴² That type of acculturation, however, did not assure them assimilation; instead it lost them cultural continuity. Colonial schools deculturated Africans while acculturating them to a pre-defined colonial model. More often than not, the schools educated a labor force of low-level workers and managers whose job was the promotion and maintenance of the status quo.⁴³ It

has been observed by Judith Marshall that these educated Africans believed that they were "white" and superior to the "peasants."⁴⁴

Social uses of literacy in Guinea's First Republic

As the successor state to the colonial government, Guinea's First Republic attempted to establish a national culture with French as its official language.⁴⁵ Often national leaders of newly independent African countries chose the European language because of Europe's international status and its attendant guarantees of upward mobility.⁴⁶ Thus, French became the language of power; it was the official language for education, administration, and cultural life of the First Republic.⁴⁷ The government's business and international diplomacy were conducted in French; the media and the economy also used the official language. The use of French was supported by bureaucrats and an elite class whose command of the language placed them in a position of power over those who did not have such a command.⁴⁸ Guinea's population was willing to use French rather than the individual maternal languages such as Maninka, Pular, or Susu because French fulfilled economic and social goals.⁴⁹ Through the state-sponsored educational system the government guided the general population into a planned social order. French literacy worked itself into the fragile unified consciousness that had brought all the ethnic groups together in order to defeat colonialism. French, the First Republic hoped, would mold a wholly educated Guinean citizenry who would support the values, attitudes, and beliefs of the country's newly created socialist economy; the citizens would acquire the modern practical skills of reading and writing so as to fulfill their place in the state.

However, the promotion of a national culture through an official language eventually became a failure in Guinea because of deep loyalties to maternal languages as the languages of instruction at the local and regional levels.⁵⁰ As a result, Sékou Touré instituted the "National Language Program" in 1968 whose focus was the promotion of maternal language education. In the Touré example, the mother tongue became the language of instruction for primary and elementary schools, and French became the language of instruction at the secondary and college levels. But Touré's policy fragmented the "national" cultural order because it also focused on a return to African roots. The problem was that instead of forging a single culture, the policy promoted the individuality of the subordinate cultures, thus creating a type of pluralistic mixture. Additionally, because the government was unable to provide universal elementary and secondary education to the entire population of Guinea, it created a gap between those who knew the local language and those who commanded the official language; only those who had mastered the

official language became part of the elite class, which had redesigned itself at the time of Guinea's independence. Nevertheless, the small French-speaking elite found itself being opposed by a general population who resented the fact that they were illiterate in the official language. Those who recognized the intrinsic value of education in the maternal language were outnumbered by those who saw the consequent imbalance of opportunities available to illiterates in the official language.⁵¹ The resentment solidified, and at the founding of the Second Republic in 1984, Touré's "National Language Policy" was overturned.⁵²

Under the Second and Third Republics of Lansana Conté, French remained Guinea's official language, and it became again the language of instruction. Guineans themselves reestablished French as the language of instruction perceiving it as an ethnic equalizer which, regardless of the level of a person's education, would allow one to become upwardly mobile. It would allow individuals seeking upward mobility to aspire to white collar jobs. Since the late 1980s, however, the country's economic problems have made it difficult for most Guineans who have graduated from a lycée or a university to find jobs.

Social liberation through N'ko literacy

On that mythical date when Souleymane Kanté invented the N'ko alphabet, some speakers of Mande languages were either literate in Arabic or in French. Those who controlled Quranic religious knowledge in Arabic mainly focused on the maintenance of an established religious order. Literacy for those who learned French centered on the creation of favorable political and social orders. One accepted idea is that Kanté designed his alphabet to reclaim knowledge from those special interest groups and to place knowledge in the hands of the general Mande-speaking population; this was a form of social liberation.

Literacy in N'ko as a means for social liberation would bring about an individual's improvement, thus allowing people greater power within their community. One social use of N'ko literacy became the standardization and distribution of local knowledge. Since 1949 when dissemination of the alphabet began, speakers of Mande languages have collected, recorded, and preserved local knowledge. Those who write N'ko have shared that knowledge with all others in the general Mande-speaking population. This is one way literacy has legitimized local knowledge. As a result, Mande languages have achieved the same status in recording knowledge as have French and Arabic.

Kanté's translations of religious, political, technological, and scientific materials into N'ko have made foreign knowledge more accessible to Mande speakers. At the same time, transcriptions have expanded the

understanding of that knowledge because of N'ko's grounding in the maternal language. Souleymane Kanté had advised Mande speakers to learn all three literacies, but, more emphatically, also to learn the written form of Mande in N'ko for a purer understanding of what they possessed imperfectly in non-maternal languages and literacies. It is believed that he reasoned that Mande speakers would more easily retain concepts and ideas they had learned in N'ko and also that they would become better Muslims because using N'ko would clarify the words of the prophet Mohammed; furthermore, they would have better access to modern technology and scientific information without having to depend upon a foreign language.

Literacy campaigns

The invention of the N'ko alphabet and the grassroots literacy movement that followed inspired a Maninka cultural revival in Guinea and a transnational one in West Africa. The grassroots movement portends the overcoming of an inertia spawned by colonial and neo-colonial subordination. Today many Maninka see themselves as stewards of culture whose use of the N'ko alphabet will draw together the Mande nation into a coherent whole. One can divide the dissemination of the alphabet into two phases: one was individual initiative alone (1949–1985) and the other was a literacy campaign driven by collective individual initiative (1986–present).

A *literacy campaign* can be defined as

a mass approach that seeks to make all adult men and women in a nation literate within a particular established frame of reference. Literacy is seen as a means to a comprehensive set of ends—economic, social-structural, and political. . . . a [literacy] campaign suggests urgency and combativeness; it is in the nature of an expectation; it is something of a crusade.⁵³

To find a historic model of a literacy movement one must look to sixteenth-century Europe. But those literacy campaigns focused more so on the acquisition of reading and writing, instead of focusing on reading and writing as a means of social control. Thus, a tension exists between the use of literacy for achieving collective goals of social control and its use for achieving individual goals.⁵⁴ The mobilization of these early literacy campaigns have depended upon governmental or religious leadership for the dissemination of literacy.⁵⁵

There are dynamics that make literacy in N'ko different from others. The goal of N'ko literacy is commensurate with the goals of other literacy campaigns in that literacy itself is not the ultimate goal, but instead

it is a part of the process in achieving a specified goal. One goal of N'ko literacy has been the formation of a national character. This was also a goal in the United States during the nineteenth century.⁵⁶ N'ko literacy differs from the typical historic model in that the alphabet is an indigenous African creation, and its mobilization focuses on individual liberation. Achieving literacy in N'ko is voluntary; it provides access to a wide variety of knowledge of interest to its readers. Although the N'ko literacy campaign is a child of the twentieth century, its decentralized nature mimics the pattern of a nineteenth-century literacy movement. Its change to a centralized effort in 1986 is an attempt to reduce the amount of time necessary to recruit converts to literacy in N'ko. However, unlike twentieth-century literacy movements whose campaigns are contained within the boundaries of a state, the N'ko literacy campaign extends across the borders of any one state because the speakers of Mande languages reside across West Africa. Literacy in N'ko, therefore, has also become a transnational identity movement.

Based on my data, the dissemination of N'ko literacy began as a local development which initially enriched cultural life for Guineans and later for speakers of Mande languages wherever they reside. If among academics today it is fashionable to speak of cultural productions as forms of domination or of appropriation, it is necessary to speak also of the often unbridgeable distances which separate the African people of the post-colonial world. In spite of all the possible pitfalls, N'ko is becoming a powerful tool in the hands of local people in Guinea because it is helping them to define and interpret their cultural heritage at precisely a moment in time when marks of cultural authenticity are often questioned. Today N'ko is being taught as far away as Thailand, and the alphabet has been added to the curriculum at the Cairo University Institute of African Research and Studies.⁵⁷

In summary, it is my objective in Chapter two to clarify the indigenous cultural context of the speakers of Mande languages in West Africa, giving specific attention to the area of Kankan, Guinea. Moreover, the chapter identifies the location of the speakers of Mande languages across West Africa and offers a transnational, cultural connection based on the relationship of their languages and their perception of a past—either heroic, historic, or both. Similarity in cultural practices will also be highlighted in order to define Mande culture. The chapter then discusses the construction and reconstruction of Mande cultural identity over time, thus illuminating the events, personalities, and intellectual groups who have forced change and defined identity. Chapter two concludes by showing how N'ko literacy is participating today in the shaping of Mande

identity, particularly in Guinea and generally in other parts of West Africa.

Chapter three describes the historical, political, and social background of the region in which the Kantés lived. It reconstructs the socio-political environment of colonial Kankan from the time of Amara Kanté, Souleymane's father, to the present generations.

Chapter four details the invention of N'ko. Based on the testimony of Kanté's family and friends, or else people contemporary to his period, this chapter reconstructs Kanté's response to perceptions of the alleged inferiority of African culture. It is in this chapter that informants discuss conversations they had with Kanté. Informants tell what they remember he said concerning his motivations for inventing N'ko and his recommendations for the dissemination of the alphabet. Chapter four also describes the texts Souleymane Kanté translated and transcribed into N'ko and addresses the value of N'ko literacy to the Mande-speaking community. Furthermore, it reconstructs the historical, political, and social context of independent Guinea at the time Kanté formally introduced the alphabet. Finally, it traces the dissemination of the alphabet as N'ko schools spread within Kankan.

Chapter five discusses Souleymane Kanté's contribution to Pan Africanism and establishes his historical position within the political and cultural perspectives of the movement. Kanté's cultural nationalism paralleled two larger Pan African movements found on both sides of the Atlantic basin; so intellectual affinities between Kanté and other important thinkers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o are offered. Furthermore, it establishes Kanté as the prime mover of a grassroots literacy movement which is spreading among speakers of Mande languages across West Africa, thus uncovering an era of Mande Enlightenment heretofore undocumented. Chapter six adds some general conclusions concerning Souleymane Kanté and his role in African intellectual history.

Notes

¹ According to informants, this date probably reflects the ending date of the complicated process by which the alphabet was created.

² The research area is the city of Kankan in the predominantly Mande-speaking, Muslim region of Haute-Guinée, Republic of Guinea. The informants from Kankan and the towns of the Baté in Haute-Guinée have expressed pride in their culture as the source of their motivation to learn the alphabet. This pride was identified by one informant as "cultural nationalism."

³ Found in *African Language Studies*, 10, 1969:162–165.

⁴ Germain Doualamou, *Langues Guinéennes et Education*, (Paris: UNESCO, 1980).

⁵ I have a copy of each text.

⁶ Daniel A. Wagner, *The Future of Literacy in a Changing World*, (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1987), p. 6.

⁷ Daniel P. Resnick and Lauren B. Resnick, "The Nature of Literacy: An Historical Exploration," *Harvard Educational Review*, Volume 47, Number 3, 1977, pp. 383–384.

⁸ Harvey J. Graff, *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth-century City*, (New York: Academic Press, 1979), p. 3.

⁹ Lawrence Stone, "Literacy and Education in England 1640–1900," *Past and Present*, Number 43, February 1969, p. 98.

¹⁰ Stone, p. 79.

¹¹ Daniel P. Resnick and Lauren B. Resnick, "The Nature of Literacy: An Historical Exploration," *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 47, no. 3, 1977:383–384.

¹² Colin Lankshear with Moira Lawler, *Literacy, Schooling, and Revolution* (New York: The Falmer Press, 1987), p. 32.

¹³ Laitin (p. 25) defines community as being created by the shared values of a culture that develop from a particular configuration of internal and external stimuli that lead to a common filtering of information.

¹⁴ E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Co., 1987) p. 11.

¹⁵ Jay Robinson, "The Social Context of Literacy," in *Perspectives on Literacy*, eds. Eugene R. Kintgen, Barry M. Kroll, and Mike Rose, (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988) p. 252; Winterowd states that the social basis for literacy is grounded in the social context. W. Ross Winterowd, *The Culture and Politics of Literacy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 11.

¹⁶ Hirsch, (p. 18) asserts that the acculturative responsibility of the school is primary and fundamental.

¹⁷ Michael Apple, in the "Foreword" to *Literacy, Schooling and Revolution* Colin Lankshear with Moira Lawler, (New York: The Falmer Press, 1987) p. ix.

¹⁸ Wlad Godzich, *The Culture of Literacy*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 101.

¹⁹ John F. Szwed, "The Ethnography of Literacy," in *Perspectives on Literacy*, Eugene R. Kintgen, Barry M. Kroll, and Mike Rose, eds., (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), p. 303.

²⁰ According to Hirsch (p. 3), the chief function of literacy is to make those who are literate the masters of the standard instrument of knowledge and communication.

²¹ Shirley Brice Heath, "Protean Shapes in Literacy Events: Ever-Shifting Oral and Literate Traditions," in *Perspectives on Literacy*, Eugene R.

Kintgen, Barry M. Kroll, and Mike Rose, eds., (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), pp. 350–356.

²² Brian V. Street, “Literacy and Social Change: The Significance of social Context in the Development of Literacy Programs,” in *The Future of Literacy in a Changing World*, (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1987), p. 55.

²³ Godzich, pp. 83–95.

²⁴ Lankshear, p. 21.

²⁵ Hirsch, p. 83.

²⁶ Apple, p. ix.

²⁷ Lankshear, p. 30.

²⁸ Paulo Freier and Donaldo Macedo., *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc., 1987), p. 54.

²⁹ Judith Marshall, *Literacy, Power, and Democracy in Mozambique*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), p. 2 Freier and Macedo (p. 38) explain that education reproduces the dominant ideology while simultaneously inculcating knowledge that negates that ideology.

³⁰ Freier and Macedo., p. 55.

³¹ Freier and Macedo., p. 7

³² Freier and Macedo., p. 111.

³³ Stone, p. 91.

³⁴ Freier and Macedo., p.143.

³⁵ Freier and Macedo., p. 143.

³⁶ Marshall, p. 17.

³⁷ Freier and Macedo., p. 142.

³⁸ Street, pp. 50–51.

³⁹ Street, p. 50.

⁴⁰ Laitin, p. 50.

⁴¹ Laitin (p. 52) cites a study done by A. Colot in Dakar, Senegal.

⁴² Defined by Patrick Manning in *Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa 1880–1985*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 60.

⁴³ Graff, p. 28.

⁴⁴ Freier and Macedo, p. 143; Marshall (pp. 107–108) who observes that the choice of one Mozambican language would have privileged one ethnic group and marginalized the others. To avoid this, they chose the European language, Portuguese, as the official language.

⁴⁵ An official language is defined here as any language, even a foreign colonial language, that has been chosen by the government for formal use in government, education, or business while a national language is an indigenous language which has been similarly appointed by the national government for formal use. Julia R. Van Dyken, “The Role of Languages

of Minority Groups for Literacy and Education in Africa," *African Studies Review*, Volume 33, No. 3, 1990, pp. 404–41.

⁴⁶ Freier and Macedo., p. 117.

⁴⁷ Laitin, p. ix.

⁴⁸ Laitin, p. 79.

⁴⁹ Laitin, pp. 42–43 and 52.

⁵⁰ Van Dyken, p. 41. In 1953 UNESCO proclaimed the importance of the maternal language in education.

⁵¹ Van Dyken, pp. 44–45.

⁵² Laitin (p. 93) states that in 1984, the *Comité de Redressment National* made the "National Language Program" the scapegoat for the educational and economic failures of the First Republic. Thus, the military junta returned French as the national language and the language of instruction.

⁵³ H.S. Bhola defines the literacy campaign in Robert F. Arnove and Harvey J. Graff, eds. *National Literacy Campaigns: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, (New York: Plenum Press, 1987), p. 3.

⁵⁴ Bhola, p. 7.

⁵⁵ Bhola, pp. 10–14.

⁵⁶ Bhola, pp. 6–7.

⁵⁷ The study of the N'ko alphabet figured prominently at the Conference on Language and Culture in Africa held October 27–28, 2001 at the Institute of African Research and Studies at Cairo University.

Chapter 2

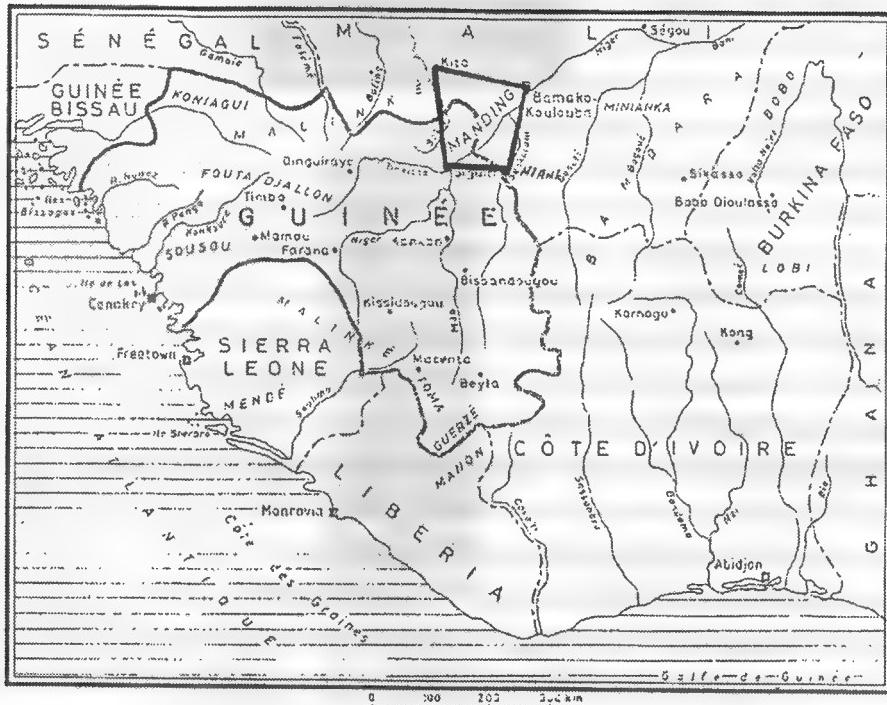
The Mande World

Our protagonist, the inventor of N’ko, is Souleymane Kanté (1922–1987) who was born into the Mande world, a cultural area that extends across West Africa from Mauritania to Nigeria. Socialized into the rich, textured, cultural tapestry of the Mande world, Kanté developed a sense of self which was assertive, generous, studious, and pious. His community, the Mande, speak variants of the same language, share the elements of culture, and have a heroic and historic past and a connection to a defined geographical space.

Mande languages and their locations

Language is often cited as the primary component of identity, and ethnic groups are usually categorized linguistically by their spoken language. Speakers of Mande languages are a diverse population of language communities dispersed throughout West Africa. There is no single Mande language, but there are as many as 46 languages that fall under the umbrella of Mande which show linguistic uniformity. (See Appendix A.) Mande languages have been documented as having one common ancestral language.¹ In the epic of Sundiata, Mande is described as a language of “... all the sons of Mali ... all those who say N’ko ... all who speak the clear language of Mali.”² In the Mande diaspora across West Africa, the degree of language difference relates to the length of time each language branch has been separated from the cradle imagined as the original mythical Mande heartland. (See Map 1.) Thus, the years of isolation a new language community experienced from others who had also left the heartland becomes a determinant factor that can establish linguistic difference.

Informants from Mali and the Republic of Guinea claim that the Maninka language spoken today along the Guinea-Mali border and Haute-Guinée in Guinea is closer to the ancestral language of the Malian Empire (13th–15th centuries), or, in other words, what is called the “clear language” in the Sundiata epic. The core Mande languages which have remained mutually intelligible are Bamana, Dyula, Maninka, and Mandenko. Until the nineteenth century, Mande culture was oral and did not possess its own writing system. With the introduction of Arabic into the Mande region, however, Arabic script may have been used to transcribe the indigenous languages because record-keeping was usually done in Arabic. Later, during the colonial period, attempts were made at transcribing African languages using Roman graphemes derived from the sound system employed by French colonizers.



Map 1. An approximation of the Mande Heartland. Source: Djibril Tamsir Niane and Ibrahima Baba Kaké, *Histoire de la Guinée*, 3e and 4e Années, Dakar: Les Nouvelles Éditions Africaines, 1986, p. 44.

The Vai speaker, Mande speakers in present-day Liberia and Sierra Leone, were the first to create an indigenous writing system in West Africa. Its author was Duala Bukele from Grand Cape Mount County in Liberia who created a Vai syllabary in 1833 which has been standardized to 212 characters.³ Working for Portuguese slave traders, Bukele learned the importance of transmitting thought in written form. Bukele's syllabary enabled Vai traders to extend their network and to restrict knowledge of their cargos as they continued plying the slave trade after it had been prohibited. Among the approximately 200,000 people who consider themselves Vai, there are no formal or informal schools that teach the syllabary, and there is no curriculum or compendium of texts written in it. The Vai policy is "each one teach one," rather than "each one teach seven" used by the Mande to teach N'ko. The script is used for record keeping and correspondence. In the region, the Vai syllabary became the prototype for other writing systems that were created in the inter-war years among indigenous peoples in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Speakers of southern Mande languages, such as the Mende (1921) and the Kpelle (1935), and speakers of the Kru languages, such as the Bassa (1920 to 1925), base their writing systems on the syllabary.⁴

Mande languages are spoken and written today in most West African countries either as first or second languages. The core Mande languages are spoken primarily in Guinea, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, and Burkina Faso. Words from these core languages are used as *linguae francae* for trade by a substantial number of Mande speakers in Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and the Gambia. Numerically, smaller populations of Mande speakers can be found in northern Ghana, Togo, Benin, and in eastern Nigeria.

The Mande speaking area in Guinea is Haute-Guinée where Maninka is the first language of 40 percent of the people and the *lingua franca* for others who speak Maninka as a second language for the purpose of trade. Radio and television broadcast news, and religious and cultural programing are transmitted in the Maninka language. Presently, the Maninka language is transcribed by two alphabets, one using the Roman alphabet based on the French sound system and the other in the indigenous N'ko alphabet.

In neighboring Côte d'Ivoire, Dyula is the primary language for a minority group living in the north of the country; Dyula serves as a *lingua franca* throughout the country, especially for trade. Dyula is used on radio and television for news, announcements, and advertising, and also for Islamic religious programs. While Dyula is written in the N'ko alphabet, it has not been standardized using the Roman alphabet.⁵ In 1973 the UNESCO-sponsored literacy project achieved approximately 41 percent literacy in African languages (which included Dyula). These languages,

however, were written in the Roman alphabet using the French sound system.⁶ In Mali where all Mande languages are spoken, 60 percent of the population speak a Mande language as a first language. Bamana (often called Bambara) has the greatest number of first and second speakers of Mande languages. Together with Maninka, Bamana serves Mali as the *lingua franca* for trade. Second only to French on the radio, Bamana is also used to broadcast news and for governmental programs. One finds government publications in Bamana written in the Roman alphabet, but using the French sound system. None are found in the N'ko script which is restricted to non-governmental use.

Smaller but no less important Mande-speaking communities are found in the Gambia, Burkina Faso, and Senegal. Mandenko, the local Mande language in the Gambia, is used in radio communication, and, at one time, there was a Mandenko language newspaper named *Kibaro* which used Roman graphemes but with the English sound system. Mandenko was also the medium of instruction for UNESCO literacy pilot projects using Roman and Arabic scripts. However, one informant described witnessing Mandenko speakers from the Gambia learning to write their own language in N'ko.⁷ Dyula is the first language for a large portion of the population in Burkina Faso and is generally used there as a *lingua franca* and also for radio communication. Government documents are written in Roman graphemes using the French sound system, and informants have reported witnessing Mande-speaking Burkinabés learning the N'ko alphabet directly from Souleymane Kanté.⁸ In Senegal, Mandenko and Maninka are spoken in the Casamance area, and Bamana is spoken in the East. Both are used in radio programming; they rely on the Roman alphabet using the French sound system, but some local people are writing Mandenko and Maninka in N'ko.⁹

Like other African language communities, speakers of Mande languages exist in a pluralistic society, and, out of necessity, are multilingual. Although speakers of one Mande language may understand the language of another Mande speaker, there are more cases where mutual intelligibility does not occur. In these cases speakers of Mande languages rely on the regional *linguae francae* to communicate. For example, if a Soninké speaker of eastern Mauritania cannot understand a Kpelle speaker of Liberia, both may shift to secondary languages such as Bamana and Maninka (their *linguae francae*, respectively). Thus, *linguae francae* unite variant speakers of Mande languages across a vast West African area by providing a common means of communication among first and second language speakers. Because Mande languages are the *linguae francae* for the region, speakers of Mande languages move easily throughout the region. They readily cross the political borders maintained by modern states.

Networks of related families move back and forth across the West African region for commerce and religion. Not all of these travelers, however, follow the nationally recognized thoroughfares that are officially monitored and controlled. Many travelers follow previously established trade routes through rural communities and evade official notice. When visiting the N'ko schools in 1994 in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, I saw examples of this fluidity. There I met informants whom I had met previously in Sanana, Guinea in January 1993 residing with family members, and there I also met another informant whom I had met in Kankan; he had traveled to Abidjan to conduct business. Easy movement throughout the informal Mande languages' network has opened the door for N'ko.

However, the large number of individual Mande languages and the extent of the Mande diaspora make it difficult to determine the exact number of Mande speakers. In 1972 David Dalby estimated that there were at least 10 million speakers of Mande languages in West Africa.¹⁰ But in 1979 J. Chevrier estimated the number to be 16 million, a figure difficult to check because not all Mande languages were added to the total of Bamana, Maninka, and Dyula speakers.¹¹ More recent figures suggests there are approximately 15 million Mande speakers who reside in an area stretching from Senegal to Nigeria.¹²

The Mande heroic and historic past

West African speakers of Mande languages trace their ancestry to a Mande heartland, the source of the Mande heroic past. Some scholars have argued that the term *Mande* is derived from *Manden*, an area place name, located between the basins of the Senegal and Niger rivers. This area is the center of cultural continuity for the Mande and was the nucleus of the Empire of Mali founded by Sundiata in 1235. While there has been debate concerning the extent of this homeland, Mande informants from the Republic of Guinea situate the center of the Mande heartland somewhere along the Guinea-Mali border from Bamako to Siguiri. At the time of Sundiata, its capital, Niani, was located on the Sankarani River. Although there is a twenty-first century town called Niani, the specific location of the historic capital is often disputed. Even though there is no physical evidence to prove their claim, Guinean Mande speakers are convinced that the present Niani is the fabled capital of Mali. Charles Bird has assessed the area as approximating the size of France.¹³

The dispersal of Mande speakers from the heartland across West Africa was the result of regional factors, such as climatic change, the economics of trade, and religious and secular wars of domination. From the cradle of Mande civilization in the Niger Valley emerged the Pre-Manding, Soninké speakers who had fashioned the empire of Ghana and Maninka

speakers who forged the empire of Mali. These groups then left the cradle spreading their language and culture throughout the Saharan trade routes extending from the Mediterranean to forested areas along the regions' river routes which included settlements along the Niger River at its eastern most point in present-day Nigeria.

The desiccation of the Sahara drove Mande speakers southward. After moving to the south and west, they found themselves divided by the Djoliba River, one part of today's Niger River.¹⁴ The separation created a linguistic division. East of the river Mande speakers asserted their dominance over other cultures. West of the river they became more homogeneous culturally and linguistically.¹⁵ The Bozo remained on the Niger river and controlled the upper Niger region. Farther down the river, in an area where rapids obstructed Niger river traffic, the Busa, the most easterly Mande speakers, ruled the lower Niger by imposing tolls on river trade.¹⁶ Mande near the riverine area remained sedentary farmers working in agriculture while those who moved into the drier savanna areas became pastoralists. Yves Person credits Mande speakers with domesticating rice, acquiring iron technology, and learning to extract the gold that supplied the trans-Saharan trade.¹⁷ Early traders introduced Mande speakers to the horse.¹⁸

Mande state-building began with the northwestern Mande speakers who united previously independent cultural groups. Southwestern Mande speakers, in contrast, dispersed in order to escape the military domination and state authority of the medieval empires. The Soninké built the Empire of Ghana around the eighth century. This empire was nourished by Niger and Senegal river basin agriculture; it came to dominate the north to south gold-salt trade with North Africa. Arabic traders introduced Islam to the empire. While individual Mande speakers accepted Islam, the King of Ghana did not.

Only after the fall of Ghana did Islam advance among the rulers.¹⁹ After a brief period, the Mande-speaking Susu (who rejected Islam) rose and claimed the leadership of what had been Ghana. After consolidating power around their capital of Kangaba on the Sankarani river, the Mande-speaking Maninka founded Mali. The kings of Mali finally accepted Islam, at first nominally under Sundiata, who had defeated the Susu warrior-king Sumanguru, and later wholeheartedly.

In time the Mali Empire ruled all that had been ancient Ghana. Later it expanded its control to the Niger River from the savanna to the forest area and along the Gambia River to the Atlantic Ocean. From the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries Mali dominated Ghana's old north to south gold-salt trade routes and the gold fields of the Bambuk in Senegal and Bouré which today is Sigiri in Guinea. During this period, Malian expan-

sion broadened the area available for proselytizing to Islam. In this period the thriving commercial center of Timbuktu became famous for its Islamic culture and education. Not all of the leaders of the Mali Empire became Muslim, however. The ancestors of the Bamana rulers left Mali to establish their own non-Muslim state.²⁰ Mali's expansion and the growth of trade routes helped to spread Mande languages throughout the region. After Mali's decline, the Songhai empire, which began as non-Mande, but was also Muslim, was overthrown by Mande speakers who garnished political leadership of the central and eastern portions of the former empire.

Kaabu, a vassal state of the Mali empire ruled the Mande speakers who had migrated to the Senegambia region before, during, and even after the end of the Malian empire.²¹ Kaabu was a Mandenko-speaking state which governed a large portion of the Senegambia until it was defeated in 1860 by Pular speakers of the Fouta Djallon.²² While other Mande speakers settled in the region of the Gambia River and established kingdoms that continued as independent entities, they fell under British control in the 1880s.

In the eighteenth century the Mande state of Ségu ascended to power. Being a Bamana-speaking state, it dominated river and forest trade in the area of the Niger River from Timbuktu to Djenné, and the state of Ségu ultimately expanded its rule into the Senegal Valley. The kingdom's rulers were not Muslims, however, Islam eventually began to spread in the early nineteenth century to the towns and among the boat people of the Niger River. Thus, enclaves of Muslim clerics and traders, often the Soninké-speaking Jakhanke who originated in Ja near the Niger bend, could be found throughout the empire.²³ All along the Bamana speakers of the countryside remained true to their indigenous religion.

The nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of yet another Mande-speaking empire builder whose name was Samori Touré. Samori brought diverse peoples under his rule and tried to impose on them uniformly Mande language and Islam. Samori was building his empire at the same time that Europeans had begun to carve out their own areas in his same region. Eventually he came into conflict with the French who ultimately destroyed his empire in 1898. Among Mande speakers today Samori is considered to be the last great resister to colonialism.

Mande culture

Just as there is a debate surrounding the nature of Mande languages and the location of the Mande heartland, so too there is one over the nature of Mande culture. In fact, scholars have questioned the existence of a broad overarching Mande culture. While acknowledging the commonality of Mande languages, one side has rejected the notion of Mande cultural

coherence. This group of critics believes that Mande speakers' cultural characteristics are similar to those of speakers of other related languages in West Africa; this theory presupposes a general West African culture based upon environmental factors.²⁴ Arguing on the other side for Mande cultural coherence, a cadre of Mande scholars convened the Conference on Manding Studies in London in 1972.²⁵ They argued that this coherence itself distinguishes Mande speakers from speakers of other West African languages. Many scholars who have specialized in Mande studies²⁶ have discerned not only a commonality in language but also in culture. Their point was made evident in their definition of Mande culture found in the booklet prepared for the conference which states:

The term 'Manding' is used to cover a number of West African peoples who speak related forms of the same language [i.e., a family of languages] and who share a similar culture: these include the Mandenko or Malinké [Maninka], the Bambara or Bamana, the Dyula and the Vai, together with many smaller ethnic groups.²⁷

Using the London conference as a springboard, subsequent Mande scholars have explored the commonality in Mande culture, and have found a distinct, cross-cutting, cultural coherence that weaves a tapestry of complex and diverse cultural practices. This coherence is rooted in the family, which for most of them is patrilineal, and three or four generations form the basic lineage. These lineages have grouped together forming clans, and a gerontocracy directs the political life of the family. Localized lineages do occupy entire villages, or else entire quarters of a town. Before the arrival of Islam, the Mande had employed a system of initiation societies for both men and women whose responsibility was to socialize the children into becoming vital members of the community. These societies operated on seven year cycles. Students within each cycle developed strong moral ties to one another, but the political hierarchy of initiation societies was not solely based on any one lineage, but instead on the eldest cycle of initiates. For the upper Niger valley there were six named, age-grade associations. After the introduction of Islam, non-Muslim Mande speakers continued to adhere to the age-grade initiation society because of its educative, religious, economic, and military contribution to the community's social order. Many Muslim Mande speakers also have age-grade associations. Although no longer responsible for religious teaching today, the age-grade association continues to aid the community in the moral socialization of the youth.

Presently, there are age-grade associations called *sédés* in predominantly Muslim Kankan which draw together men or women who were

born within the same five-year period.²⁸ A special bond develops among the members of the *sédé*. They meet to discuss community issues, act together to guide the youth, and celebrate together, as also do the women when they have an occasion to dance the Mamaya.²⁹ In the village of Sanana, a *sédé* of a certain age governs the secular, social interactions of the youth.³⁰ Youth behavior becomes their responsibility, and thus they organize activities for young people in order to guide them in secular decision-making. Initiation societies and Islam co-exist in the Mande heartland. Although much of the Mande-speaking world is Muslim, Mande speakers, regardless of religious orientation, still use some form of age-grade associations to socialize their children.

The villages of Maninka and Bamana speakers are quite similar in any given environment. One readily observable difference, however, is the number of mosques; in a Maninka town mosques will be more numerous. The Vai and Mendé, Mande speakers of the forest zone, have their villages with the houses arranged in similar patterns with terraces, walls, and the villagers use of the forest as a defense perimeter.³¹ Performing a wide variety of occupations from indigenous to modern, depending on location, Mande speakers inhabit diverse rural and urban landscapes. In rural villages farmers and herders work their farms, usually located a short distance away. The dry season finds farmers en route to sell local commodities such as rice, okra, or water-melon, or to purchase for resale products not grown or made locally. Mande farmers acquire cattle because in the past cattle ownership was a measure of wealth. Even today the bridewealth is assessed in reference to cattle. Mande speakers in the rural and urban settings have retained their special occupational groups such as bards or *griots* (called *jeliw* by the Mande), and blacksmiths or potters, or else leatherworkers.³² The blacksmith's status, for example, is considered high class everywhere among Mande speakers except among the Susu. Non-Muslim Maninka and Bamana speakers see the smith as possessing special sacred powers. For the southern and southwestern Mande, smiths are also important specialists in conducting rituals. Among southern Mande speakers and the northern Vai-speaking groups, the smiths are town guardians; so they are centrally located in a special compound or quarter, often at the city gates. While southern, Mande speaking smiths may be found at the town's gates, they are not otherwise assigned any specific section of the city.³³

Mande identity

In order to establish Mande identity one must consider several scholars' arguments. According to Peter Burke, cultural identity is a socially constructed phenomenon.³⁴ Its concern is with defining and redefining obligations among the members of the society, so that each social group iden-

tifies itself by a name which divides the “we” from the “they.”^{35,36} Additionally, many of the most stable groups identify themselves by the language that binds them together as neighbors and sets them apart from other cultures.³⁷ Seen as one of the most powerful signs of identity, language binds a community together by expressing its collective values.^{38,39} Therefore, a nationality can be built upon a complementary communications network among members of a language community.⁴⁰ Simply said, language is culture.⁴¹ Identifying culture only by referring to language, however, often may reduce the constantly changing complexity of social organization to a single dimension. This approach may also obliterate differences in culture which do exist within a language family.

Language is only one of the cultural symbols around which identity is organized.⁴² Also important are shared values and a positive view of ethnic history complete with its concomitant heroic cultural actors. The construction of cultural identity, often viewed as ethnicity is a “consciously crafted ideological creation.”⁴³ However, since identity does not exist as a natural consequence of shared culture, a catalyst is often needed if the community is to focus on traditional values. This catalyst can also open the way for the acceptance of newly formed ideologies. Because intellectuals are the agents who oversee this “conscious construction of identity,” their competing discourses eventually resolve into a complex statement of what constitutes identity, thus establishing the proverbial Hegelian synthesis.⁴⁴ While, on the one hand, Leroy Vail does not credit Africans as being intellectually capable of constructing identity without European assistance, Steve Feierman, on the better side of the argument, says that intellectuals in fact have emerged from within the indigenous social order. Feierman defines intellectuals as those individuals who are “engaged in socially recognized organization, directive, educative, and expressive activities.”⁴⁵ His conceptualization of intellectuals draws upon a society’s language and its specific cultural knowledge in order to create the cultural identity of the collective whole. Broad collective identities are the result of social and intellectual processes and the overlapping settings of cultural activity, according to David Cohen and E. S. Atieno Odhiambo.⁴⁶ Burke adds that individuals or groups use language to control others or to resist being controlled, or else, when societies change or resist change, they do take part in debates which are shaped by and reshape language.⁴⁷ To Louis Brenner, when voices representing new knowledge are added, cultural identity changes.⁴⁸ It seems evident that all who are intellectuals discuss their conflicting points of view, and it is through their discussions that the cultural identity of the group emerges. Also, foreign-trained intellectuals may interact with this group and a newly emerging identity accommodates the integration of the new voice. Thus

the foreign voice is heard as only one voice among many. Constantly changing, cultural identity represents the perceived final chord derived from the struggle among the community's voices.

The construction of cultural identity leads to the greater conceptualization of a nation and to a national identity. In a rather obvious western manner, Benedict Anderson defines a nation as being an imagined political community with finite borders beyond which lie all other nations. He defines the community as imagined because individuals within it will never know, meet, or hear about most of their co-members, but know in their minds that the community exists.⁴⁹ E.D. Hirsch Jr. asserts that it is language that makes the community imaginable.⁵⁰ When a particular community's language becomes the major form of communication in all social contexts, then a nation is most easily imagined, adds David D. Laitin.⁵¹ Drawn from deep cultural roots, nationalism, observes Anderson, is not a consciousness expressed by an existing nation, but the consciousness that invents a nation where one had not previously existed.⁵² One may conclude by adding that the idea of *nation-ness* that leads to the formation of a nation state is a distinctly European construct imported by developing nations.

The historical construction of Mande identity

The pre-Colonial era

Kankan in Guinea had developed as a savanna trade town astride the trade routes running from the forest through the savanna to the desert in the pre-colonial era.⁵³ At Kankan, the overland trade route from the forest to the desert met the Niger River trade route at the Milo River, one of its tributaries.⁵⁴ Kankan derived its importance from its riverine position where it brokered the trade going to and coming from the Sankaran and also the trade going to and coming from Kouroussa on the Niger River.⁵⁵ The principal long-distance traders of the region were Mande speakers, and non-Mande speakers learned Mande language to communicate in the marketplace.⁵⁶ During periods of Mande dominance, the *jeliw* (Mande oral historians) promulgated Mande culture, history and a government for the expanding community. Kankan maintained the title of chief town in the region of the southern Soudan until 1894 when trade patterns shifted to Bissandougou and Sigiri.⁵⁷

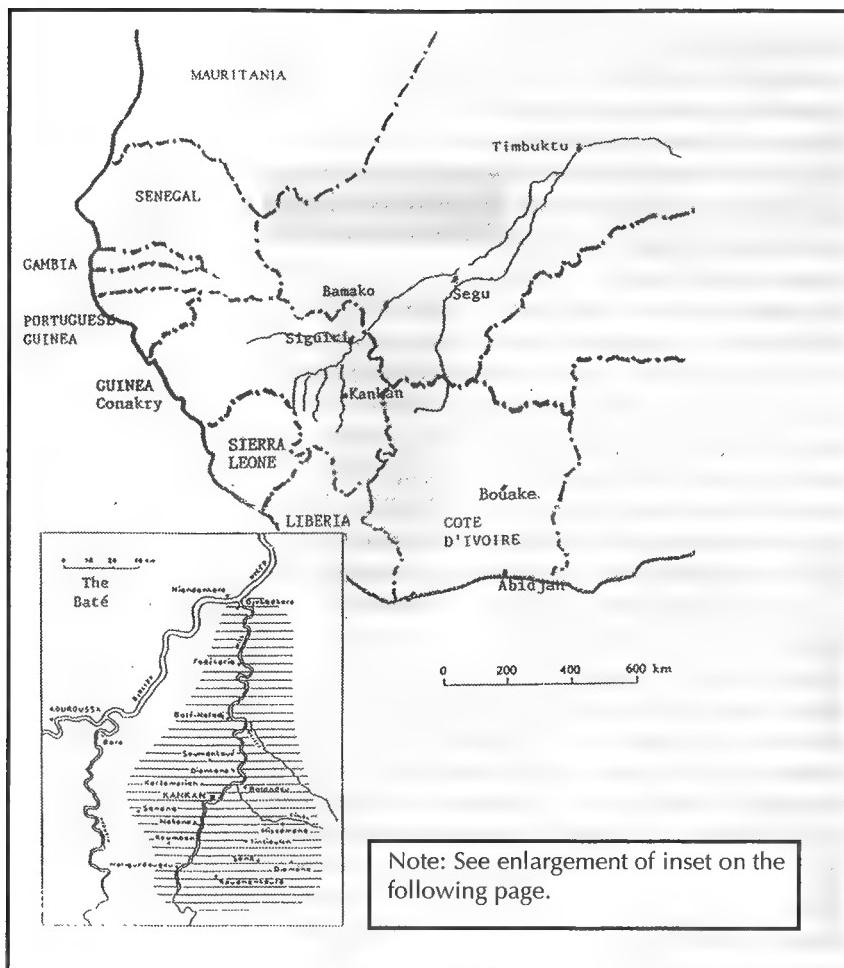
Packed into the minds of people just as goods were packed into trade caravans arriving from the Maghreb, Islam penetrated the Mande world beginning in the eighth century. Long distance traders on the north to south gold-salt trade route are responsible for the diffusion of Islam into West Africa. Over time Islam spread to the towns situated along the trade routes dominated by the Mali Empire. It gained many converts because

Mande speakers were duly impressed with the knowledge and wealth possessed by the traders. Others may have embraced Islam during periods of ecological insecurities such as drought and famine. The number of Muslim converts increased in trade towns like Kankan because prosperous trade provided the financial support necessary to free Muslim scholars to educate the next generation.⁵⁸ As Arab traders Islamized the Mande world, the Arabic language and its script became the language and literacy which acquired religious power. Local officials realized the potential power held in the written word, and thus Arabic literacy dominated the sectors of religion and administration, while an unwritten Mande remained the vernacular language of trade.

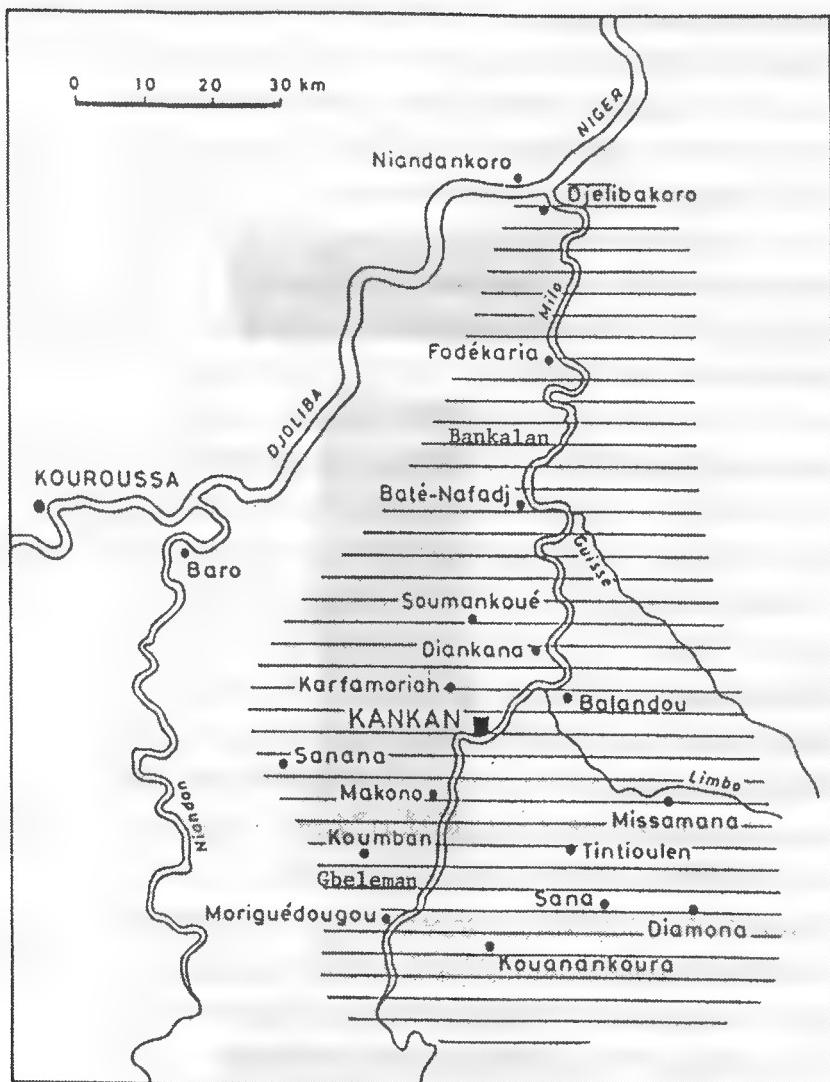
It was the role of the *jeliw* to ease the cultural transitions that occurred as accommodations were made under the duress caused by the making and reshaping of West African empires. They harmonized new belief systems with the context of Mande cultural identity specifically by incorporating Islam into the Mande heroic past.⁵⁹ The *jeliw* were joined by the *marabouts*, Muslims literate in Arabic, thus creating a cadre of Mande intellectuals. These religious leaders profited from a West African cultural response of incorporating the diversity presented by new members of the community.⁶⁰ Therefore, many *marabouts* added the knowledge of African healing arts to their own compendium of medical information. Trade communities depended upon Muslims for healing, official political and diplomatic correspondence, and commercial accounting and correspondence.⁶¹

The Islamic Mande intellectuals in Kankan were the Maninka-Mory.⁶² The Kaba family is representative of a typical *marabout* family who moved into the region of the Baté about 1550.⁶³ (See Maps 2 and 3.) The Kaba family has been credited with bringing Islam to the region despite the fact that Baté communities had practiced Islam before their arrival.⁶⁴ They also brought with them the rich Sarakollé heritage in trade. As a result, Kankan grew into a commercial metropolis more quickly than if it had been left to evolve alone on the trade route. Guinean historian Kefing Condé has defined Kankan's role as being that of an intermediary between the savanna and the forest area.

The Maninka-Mory swelled the ranks of the heretofore restricted set of those controlling knowledge through the medium of language. They joined the *jeliw* in constructing a value-based, Mande identity for what had become a mixed society.⁶⁵ Eventually, Islamic discourse became a major influence in the construction of identity because the *marabout* has proselytized the next generations through Quranic education. Kankan and its environs thus became renowned for the quantity and quality of its



Map 2. Region of West Africa with place names and inset of the Baté communities. Source: Djibril Tamsir Niane and Ibrahima Baba Kaké, *Histoire de la Guinée*, 3e and 4e Années, Dakar: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1986, p. 74.



Note: Soumankoué is Soumankoyin; Soumankoyin-Kölönin is next to Soumankoyin; Diankana is Djankana.

Map 3. Baté communities that support N'ko schools (enlarged view of inset from Map 2). Source: Adapted from Djibril Tamsir Niane and Ibrahima Baba Kaké, *Histoire de la Guinée*, 3e and 4e Années, Dakar: Les Nouvelles Éditions Africaines, 1986, p. 74.

Islamic schools.⁶⁶ Literacy in the language of power, Arabic, became an altogether new feature of cultural identity which acted as a catalyst in a slightly different way, and it altered the Muslim, Mande speakers' conceptualization of time and space. The Muslim's fixed calendar and their division of the day into prayer times regularized time, and new graphic techniques altered the approach to spatial relationships, such as measuring, numbering, recording, and repeating observations.⁶⁷

There were levels of literacy, however. Quranic school students who became Quranic school scholars learned Arabic at a greater level of literacy than had their brethren who only memorized the Quran and their prayers.⁶⁸ The Quranic scholars not only read, but they also interpreted and explained religious works. Literacy in Arabic also gave adept students an access to the sum of accumulated Arab knowledge recorded in history, literature, and the sciences. For those possessing a first language, however, communication in a second language [like Arabic] at times resulted in the alteration of their indigenously constructed thought processes, observes Walter Ong.⁶⁹ This problem manifested itself as a difficulty in internalizing data learned in the second language and as a difficulty in expressing original thought in the second language. For students whose language of instruction was not their mother tongue, second language communication posed obstacles to understanding. Those conversant with and literate in Arabic controlled the dissemination of religious knowledge. When the French arrived at the end of the nineteenth century, Mande speakers who were Muslim and literate in Arabic represented a large portion of Mande speakers in West Africa.

Cultural accommodations were not as easy as Mande speakers were propelled into the nineteenth century and the colonial era. Mande-speaking communities, however, endured the stress applied by many different factors, and, obviously, significant commercial changes occurred as the result of the shift from the slave trade to legitimate trade early in the nineteenth century. Although attitudes and commodities changed, the trade routes continued to operate as they had, and European attempts to redirect trade away from the north-south trade route to the coast had little effect on the existing Mande trade network which was connected to the coast by the forest.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Mande empire-builder Samori Touré consolidated many Mande speakers under his rule. Taking the eminent title *Almami*, Samori carved out a West African empire which actively promoted and supported Islam. He built schools to reeducate the conquered people who had not been among the faithful. Thus, students from throughout the empire were funneled into the schools in and around Kankan.⁷⁰ Samori also negotiated a mutual defense treaty with

the Maninka-Mory of Kankan by making a pact reflecting their mutual interest in converting all non-Muslims in the region. However, Kankan refused to aid Samori when he attacked Sérébourema Cissé because the latter was a Muslim of Sarakollé origin. It was then that Samori turned his war machine on Kankan, conquering it in 1881. Karamö Daye Kaba, ancestor of the ruling Kabas of Kankan today, then sought out the French and invited them to Kankan to oust its oppressor.^{71,72}

The Colonial era

European empire builders inflicted their rule on the Mande speakers in the nineteenth century. They moved to control trade within newly imposed, artificial boundaries which had been drawn at the Conference of Berlin in 1884–1885. Despite their meddling, trade networks maintained their fluidity along long-established routes that passed through British controlled Sierra Leone and independent Liberia. European languages usurping political and administrative power did not affect the trade in the interior. The Europeans were truly unable to capture the interior's trade routes because the Mande controlled the trade networks; lines of communication and commerce were dominated by Mande-speaking merchants of the diaspora. Their language gave them invisibility and invincibility as they entered and exited local communities and trade towns.

The merchants from Kankan moved across what they deemed to be artificial colonial borders with regularity and with impunity.⁷³ A good illustration of population movement is offered by the story of Souleymane Kanté's trip to Côte d'Ivoire in 1942. The French had closed the border crossings on the main roads because of the second World War. Seeing that the French were imprisoning travelers and traders, Kanté and his students traveled the back roads. Each night they stayed with an imam or a teacher in a small village. For 35 days the small group walked from Soumankoyin-Kölönin in Guinea to Bouaké in Côte d'Ivoire.⁷⁴ Although French officials expressed concern about the movement of people across these borders, they recognized that a trade network was already in place, and they did not want to disrupt it unnecessarily. Instead representatives from French commercial houses established shops in Kankan in an effort to tap into the trade at this recognized major redistribution center.^{75,76} Informants identify acronyms and names such as CFAO, UNICOMER, Chavanel, ESCOA, PERISAC, and Compagnie du Niger as commercial establishments in Kankan during the 1940s and 1950s.⁷⁷

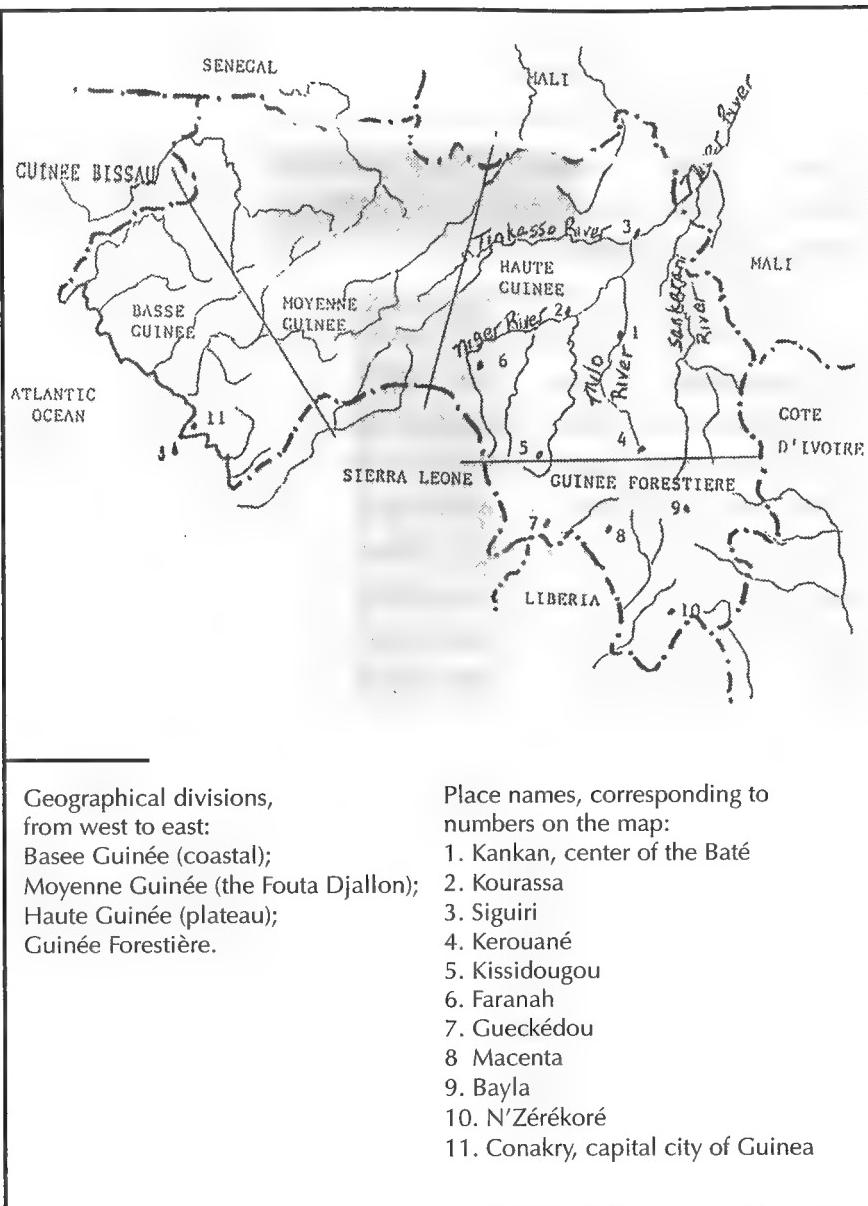
While the political and administrative domination of empire builders was not a new experience for the Mande, European attempts to usurp Mande culture by imposing a foreign language had a traumatic effect. Many Maninka speakers in Haute-Guinée resisted the imposed official

language by refusing to learn it and by refusing to send their children to the colonial schools where the language of instruction became French.⁷⁸ (See Map 4.) Under French domination, a new type of intellectual appeared—a European-style, school-trained bureaucrat who was literate in French. Those who manipulated the French language and literacy gained easier access to knowledge and achieved control which assured them enhanced status and wealth. French became the new language, and literacy granted power in the realms of politics, administration, and international economics; however, Arabic remained the language of Islamic religious power, and the Mande languages continued as the languages of local and regional commerce; it was the vernacular.

Literacy, as written language, became an important issue in the contest for access to and control over knowledge, but access to this modern knowledge was limited to those who were educated in French. The problem for those who became speakers of French as a second language, observes Ong, resulted in the alteration of indigenously constructed thought processes produced by a first language.⁷⁹ Mande speakers who opted for education and communication through French language were often frustrated in their attempts at communication. Mande speakers had to alter the meaning of communication to accommodate the inadequacies of the medium being used. While some became more adept at French than others, the point remains that they had to re-pattern the process of thinking in order to give verbal expression to their ideas, and the complicated process of communicating in a second language even silenced some. Second-language processing put students at a disadvantage because they became totally bilingual; they had to translate and interpret the meaning encoded in the text. For adults, it had the effect of frustrating creativity and originality of indigenous thought and stifled articulation. This, in fact, became an issue to my informants, and I offer it in order to synthesize their experiential reality.

Recognizing the value of literacy, Mande intellectuals had experimented unsuccessfully with writing Maninka in Arabic script and the Roman alphabet, but they found the expression of Mande languages in these writing systems difficult because Mande languages are tonal. Foreign alphabets were deemed incapable of rendering the full scope of Maninka thought through written communication even though some African languages have fared better than others, such as Yoruba which uses a Roman script based on Italian sounds. However, the script uses only three accents to show tonality, even though Yoruba speakers distinguish among six tones.⁸⁰

Literacy itself became a cultural issue in Côte d'Ivoire when the Lebanese journalist Kamal Marwa wrote that Africans were inferior because



Map 4. Geographical divisions of the Republic of Guinea and place names for Haute-Guinée and Guinée Forestière. Source: Abdoul Goudoussi Diallo, Madame Bah Aminatou, H. Jover, and M. Diridollo, *Geographie de la Guinée et de l'Afrique*. Paris: FOMA, 5 Continents, 1987, p.13.

they had no written form of communication in *Nahnu fi Afrikiya* (*We are in Africa*) published in 1944.⁸¹ He said that their voices [meaning African sounds] were like those of the birds, impossible to transcribe.⁸² Informants claim that it was upon reading this statement that Souleymane Kanté probably undertook the task to create a written script for the Maninka form of Mande. Thus, from 1944–1948 Kanté unsuccessfully tried to write Maninka using first the Arabic script and then the Roman alphabet. Probably frustrated, he resorted to inventing a totally new form of representation which he is reported to have completed on April 14, 1949.⁸³ Because his alphabet reproduces the Maninka's tonality, it has been since then promoted as the universal written expression of all Mande languages.⁸⁴ In fact, the alphabet is identified by the Mande pronoun *N* and the verb *ko*, which in Mande languages means "I say." As a result, a new revolutionary form of literacy entered the Mande cultural arena.

My informants have claimed that the N'ko alphabet is a source of great pride to all speakers of Mande languages.⁸⁵ Several say Kanté was directed by divine guidance: God taught Souleymane Kanté N'ko.⁸⁶ The potential generated by literacy was more important to Kanté than the initial challenge of creating the alphabet. Informants repeat that when he was asked about his motivation for inventing the alphabet, Kanté responded that it was created to struggle against ignorance and illiteracy.⁸⁷ One important but unstated potential is N'ko's power over secrets. Informants observe that N'ko's ability to preserve secrets is a by-product of knowing an alphabet that others do not; it is cryptic to those who don't know it.⁸⁸ According to one informant, the Maninka speakers immediately recognized and discussed N'ko's potential value. The "whites," as informants called them, also recognized its potential, and that is why they did not discuss it.⁸⁹ The N'ko alphabet has been ignored in official colonial documents which only represent the discourse of the dominant group—"the public transcript."⁹⁰ Its omission may reflect either that the Europeans did not know about it or that they were ignoring it. If the "public transcript" is the official account of the interaction between the dominant and subordinate groups, Scott observes, then the discourse that dominates the subordinate group is the "hidden transcript."⁹¹ Since there was no such dialogue between the two in the case of N'ko, it is as if N'ko did not exist, thus relegating it to the "hidden transcript."

The intellectual cadre expanded again to accommodate the resulting shift in values. According to the public transcript, the French colonial schools educated students through the vehicle of the French language to become civil servants, professionals, and middle class businessmen.⁹² Many students admired the type of knowledge for which the French language was the gateway. With the approval of the colonial government, Euro-

pean and American Christian missionary groups (Catholics and Protestants) educated another cadre of intellectuals. They encouraged Mande speakers from the Christian community to join a new, cross-cultural group of Christian intellectuals. One goal of these European language-based forms of socialization was social control. The voices of these intellectuals reflected the cultural influences imposed by access to and control over knowledge achieved through the use of a foreign language.

Another group of intellectuals also operated on the margin of the public transcript, and their response to the shift in values reflected an indigenous reconfiguration of Quranic schools involved in the socialization process. Similarly, they were affected by the control over knowledge based on a foreign language. Although Quranic school education continued, the need to gain access to knowledge forced a reevaluation of educational content. Some Islamic educators changed and applied lessons they learned from the new empire creating a new type of Quranic school called the *médersa* (grades 1–8). The curriculum of the *médersa* was altered to offer independent language proficiency in Arabic earlier to Muslim students. Arabic itself became a course of study, and it gradually assumed the role of being the language of instruction for other courses. To a limited extent, *médersa* graduates could read and interpret for themselves the Quran and other religious works. The *médersa* provided a protected environment where Muslim values were maintained while at the same time the *médersa* provided an access to knowledge of French, because French became the language of science and technology—the language of modernity.⁹³ Although Arabic-speaking intellectuals were more tightly bound to their local community than to their European counterparts, they still only offered control of knowledge through the lens of a foreign language.

Central to this study and deep from within the hidden transcript emerges yet another group of intellectuals. People who were N'ko literate sought the same type of knowledge as those who had developed the *médersa*, but they wanted to reconfigure socialization along indigenous lines. Their first step was to control language and literacy; so an informal parallel school system taught the N'ko alphabet and provided students with access to books and documents written in N'ko. Only by acquiring indigenous literacy could they plan for the second step, the teaching of a subject matter curriculum through the medium of Mande language and literacy. The goal of this group's socialization process was angled toward individual edification rather than social control. As a result, individual Mande speakers educated one another in N'ko literacy in order to become yet another segment of intellectuals who would add their voices to the debate which eventually led to the independence period.

The First Republic

In the post-Colonial era and at the beginning of the First Republic, the voices of Mande intellectuals continued to compete for control over knowledge, but they still had no entry into the public transcript. However, they took a stance by making a cross-cultural statement. The Maninka speakers in the former French colony of Guinea joined other ethnic groups to speak with a unified voice when they resoundly said "No" to Charles de Gaulle's proposed French Community.⁹⁴ This "No" vote seemed to vocalize their despair with French cultural colonization, and it made evident their long-silent rejection of French language, French education, and Catholicism. In 1958 under the leadership of Sékou Touré, Guinea became an independent nation and embarked on its First Republic (1958–1984). Forcefully thrust into an independence which recognized European created borders, the Maninka speakers of Haute-Guinée became politically separated from their Mande-speaking counterparts in Francophone and Anglophone Africa. The arbitrary divisions imposed by Europeans had indeed split up Mande speakers living among the countries of West Africa. But Maninka speakers also rejected the inevitable balkanization of the region.⁹⁵ While the European-invented boundaries kept them officially apart, unofficially the Mande trade networks and Islamic religious networks operated as they always had irrespective of formal borders.⁹⁶

The honeymoon period of the Touré administration thus saw a rise of cultural nationalism among the Maninka speakers. The historical resurrection of their heroic past and the newly acquired visibility of Maninka intellectuals, such as Souleymane Kanté and Sékou Touré, boosted their cultural confidence. Additionally, increasing predominance of Maninka speakers in positions of power and importance offered them a potential return to greatness. While French remained Guinea's official language, Maninka-speaking intellectuals achieved political dominance in the government at the regional and national levels.⁹⁷ However, during the First Republic the responsibility for creating a unified nation for all of Guinea's ethnicities superseded personal ethnic allegiances and aspirations, to the detriment of Mande speakers.

Political and administrative leadership eventually devolved into the hands of Sékou Touré, a Maninka speaker himself from Faranah, Haute-Guinée. During the political campaign that had launched his career, he had promoted cultural nationalism in Haute-Guinée by associating himself with the Mande's heroic past. He played on his family name advancing the idea that he was a descendant of Samori Touré, the well-admired Islamic empire builder and colonial resister. By drawing upon Mande

history, Sékou Touré succeeded in achieving a momentary unification of the divergent ethnicities that made up the country of Guinea.⁹⁸ In addition to appealing to the primarily Muslim Maninka-speaking voters, Touré also courted all Islamic communities, and he appealed to those who opposed subjugation by the French. As national leader, Touré appointed a slew of Maninka speakers to positions of leadership in ministries and to leadership in the military. However, the promise of a return to Mande glory through Maninka dominance in the region evaporated with the progression of events. Sékou Touré and his government were forced to govern in a crisis management mode because of Guinea's tenuous international relations. Although there continued to be surges in efforts among the Maninka-speakers to assert their cultural identity, Maninka nationalism had to content itself with only positions of power for individual Maninka speakers and for Maninka supremacy in Haute-Guinée.

Despite a Maninka leadership role at the national level, Sékou Touré's national government engaged in a concerted effort to strip the Maninka of Haute-Guinée of their newly awakened cultural identity. Some Maninka then realized that they had been betrayed by the national government with its decisions in the sectors of economics, religion, and education. National government policies became adversarial to the steadily evolving Maninka character. One action taken by Sékou Touré was to thwart Guinea's impending international, economic, isolation dictated by France and her allies by accepting the invitation of Warsaw Pact Nations into their marketplace. The First Republic's acceptance of socialist-communist economic policies seem to run counter to the intrinsically, entrepreneurial character of the Maninka who had for centuries been merchants engaged in international trade. Politically, Touré had also campaigned on an Islamic platform. Many members of the cross-cultural Islamic leadership who had supported him and had guaranteed his victory also became disappointed by his rejection of Islam as a state religion. Moreover, Maninka speakers received mixed cultural messages from Touré's policies in language and education because, having embraced nationalism, Touré's national government retained French as the national, unifying language. Then in 1968 Touré instituted the "National Language Policy" of maternal language education in grades one through eight. While delighted at the prospect of promoting cultural identity through African languages, the Maninka realized that they would be in many ways disfranchised from access to internationally, respected knowledge which European languages conferred. In an effort to reassert control over cultural identity, the Maninka, through various individual initiatives, resisted the national government's attempt to impose its policies.

The pre-independence prosperity of the Maninka slipped away as Sékou Touré began dictating his economic policies. In 1958 Kankan enjoyed a well-organized flourishing commerce, and European-focused stores were full of a wide variety of merchandise.⁹⁹ The exodus of European merchants at independence also improved the economic opportunity for Kankannais merchants who had worked in their shops.^{100,101} Many merchants also started expanding their networks and their profits by establishing corporations.¹⁰² But the Mande trade networks and religious networks still operated as they had in the past, and it became increasingly difficult for the Maninka speakers of Kankan to participate in trade; they had been obviated from the modern world. Many Maninka-speakers believed that governmental economic policies were an aggression against the merchants of Haute-Guinée and a vendetta against Kankan.¹⁰³

The first attack on Kankan's commercial network occurred in 1960 when Sékou Touré took Guinea out of the "Franc Zone" (CFA) and created his own currency, the Guinea Franc.¹⁰⁴ Some people understood that this action was a final effort to withdraw from French colonialism and neocolonialism.¹⁰⁵ The merchants would have preferred to continue using the CFA because that was the currency that they knew and understood.¹⁰⁶ The pullout placed Guinean merchants under a financial strain because with the exception of Liberia and Sierra Leone, many of the neighboring countries with whom the Kankan merchants traded were still in the "Franc Zone." Meanwhile, the trade language remained constant, and trade routes continued to operate as they always had, but the currency and its value now changed from one border to another. For the first time the Kankannais merchants felt the constraints of the European imposed boundaries that had never before been an obstacle to trade.

The First Republic tried unsuccessfully to implant economic socialism under the Loi-Cadre on November 8, 1964, and during the Cheytane of 1975. The focus of these economic policies was the cessation of private commerce.¹⁰⁷ Commerce itself was to be redirected into the hands of the government which would control the access to and the prices of products. Using the law as a club, the national government tried to arrest all trade that did not enter and exit under its direction through the port at Conakry. It also tried to dam up the indigenous conduit through which trade had flowed across the borders of Guinea and through its historic redistribution point at Kankan. A frontal assault on Maninka cultural identity, these policies acted like a surgical strike to separate the Maninka from an identity evolved from their historic past.

The expressed reasoning behind the First Republic's policies was a desire to equalize the incomes of all Guineans. Those who had been full-time or part-time merchants were expected to return to the fields. The

Loi-Cadre and the Cheytane limited the number of merchants, suppressed import-export licenses for private entrepreneurs, and applied capital punishment for trafficking across the borders.¹⁰⁸ The law made it illegal for those not attached to the government's monopoly to engage in commerce, and the merchants of Kankan felt that they had had more freedom during the colonial period. The negative impact of those laws on the lives of merchants created a new Mande diaspora to Abidjan, Monrovia, Bamako, and Dakar.¹⁰⁹

Many Kankannais merchants, on the other hand, remained steadfast, employing covert resistance tactics in an attempt to regain control over their lives. The immediate response of these merchants and other Maninka who had access to products was to create a black market and to operate an underground economy.¹¹⁰ Informants reported that only a few shops remained after the shut down of private commerce. However, a shop does not make a merchant, so the merchants sold merchandise from their homes. When the military arrested merchants returning from Mali, Senegal, or Côte d'Ivoire for trafficking in private trade, they simply paid them bribes and went about reselling the merchandise in Kankan.¹¹¹ These merchants used their economic language of power, Maninka and N'ko literacy, in order to protect their interests, and those who had already learned N'ko were able to keep their business records hidden. Those who had not been motivated to learn it, learned it from their fellow merchants, and thus acquired power by being able to hide their dealings from N'ko illiterates. Many other Kankannais merchants left Kankan and relocated within the Mande diaspora across West Africa.¹¹² These merchants also hired employees who were literate in N'ko to maintain their economic contacts in Kankan as well as to keep a personal correspondence with family and friends. More importantly, some taught N'ko in the communities in which they settled.

Sékou Touré seemed to turn his back on Islam. The Maninka Islamic community and the larger cross-cultural Islamic community experienced frustration at the hands of the national government. Since Touré had campaigned for Islamic unity, many from the general Islamic community felt that there had been a pledge of sorts to make Guinea an Islamic state.¹¹³ As a partial concession to Guinea's religious majority, Touré did create in 1975 the "National Islamic Council," an advisory council of Islamic scholars, and a Ministry of Islamic Affairs. He also provided some funding for believers to make the pilgrimage to Mecca.¹¹⁴

The rising tide of Maninka cultural nationalism was further derailed by a national government trying to balance a multi-ethnic society in which Maninka, Pular, and Susu speakers each represented 30 percent of the

population with all other groups combining to form the other 10 percent. Sékou Touré was aware that in his role as national leader any show of favoritism to the Maninka would result in unrest and perhaps even rebellion among the Pular and Susu. Thus, in his lack of favoritism he neglected his own primary language group. Additionally, he did not want to give the French an excuse to reestablish their colonial rule, so that Maninka speakers promoted to powerful positions did not necessarily redirect influence and power to the Maninka dominated region of Haute-Guinée. Only Faranah, the president's hometown, seemed to benefit substantially from his position in leadership.¹¹⁵

In 1958 Souleymane Kanté introduced the debate over language and literacy by presenting his alphabet to Sékou Touré. Like other Guineans at independence, Kanté had returned home from Côte d'Ivoire where he had been an Islamic book merchant.¹¹⁶ In addition to inventing and standardizing his N'ko alphabet in Côte d'Ivoire, Kanté had also begun teaching N'ko to students and translating works into N'ko.¹¹⁷ Although Souleymane Kanté made his formal presentation of the alphabet in 1958, the N'ko alphabet had preceded him to Guinea soon after its invention with the Kankannais merchants who were engaged in the wide-ranging Mande trade network.¹¹⁸ While Sékou Touré praised the Maninka-based creation, he rejected the idea of the N'ko alphabet as the national alphabet of Guinea. He believed that N'ko could not provide a written medium for all of Guinea's ethnic groups. Although promoted as universal, N'ko may express any language, but it cannot decode the language. Therefore, speakers of Pular cannot understand the speakers of Maninka.

Faced with a desire for language pluralism and to avoid ethnic rivalries within the confines of the nation state, the First Republic elected to retain French as the common language for purposes of efficient administration and rule. This policy derisively called "language rationalization"¹¹⁹ was chosen by independence governments across Africa as they attempted to mold their multi-lingual populations into nation states, thus hoping in that manner to overcome ethnic loyalties.¹²⁰ Within the context of multiculturalism, forcing a Maninka-derived alphabet on the rest of the country would promote dissension. However, in having considered the N'ko alphabet, Sékou Touré was at the forefront of his colleagues in later discussions of the use of maternal languages as the language of instruction.

By the 1960s the concept of education in the maternal language was one topic discussed and debated by representatives of West African nations at the meetings of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and later at meetings sponsored by UNESCO.^{121,122} Touré had accepted and did subscribe to the concept of education in the maternal language.¹²³

Therefore, he applied for and received UNESCO funding in order to implement a maternal language education program for Guinea called “*Langue Nationale*” (1968–1984).¹²⁴ Guinea’s disparate society, however, required the selection of several maternal languages for its literacy program. Each one became the language of instruction and of overall communication in the area where there was a predominance of speakers.¹²⁵ The government selected Maninka as the maternal language for Haute-Guinée. Educators charged with standardizing Maninka to the Roman grapheme invited Souleymane Kanté to participate in the process.¹²⁶ Considered an expert because of the time he had spent examining the language, Kanté accepted the invitation, and during the 1970s he retained his advisory capacity on language policy.¹²⁷

Despite his role in aiding the government’s program, Kanté received no official support from the government for his own alphabet. The N’ko alphabet was not recognized in the government’s public schools or in Islamic Quranic schools (or *médersas*), nor was it recognized as a contribution to the fight against illiteracy. N’ko was being taught, however, by individuals in Kankan, in Haute-Guinée, and in Mande speaking communities across West Africa. N’ko was not used as a writing system for instruction for a curriculum but as the object of instruction.

The governments of Lansana Conté

The Second and Third Republics (1984–present) under the Susu leadership of Lansana Conté witnessed the emergence of a more varied set of Mande intellectuals.¹²⁸ These intellectuals were the product of a highly evolved set of values promoted in a variety of educational systems. Only in this period does N’ko become a part of the “public transcript.” Cautiously, yet boldly, Mande intellectuals have strengthened Mande cultural identity. The national bureau of the non-governmental organization [NGO], *L’Association pour l’impulsion et la Coordination des Recherches sur l’Alphabet N’ko* [ICRA-N’KO], in existence since 1987, with branches in each of Guinea’s prefectures, openly promotes the spread of the N’ko alphabet. Schools openly teach N’ko as they had before, but the classroom now includes the physical plants of government schools and businesses after hours. Moreover, the resulting literacy from this literacy campaign, ongoing since June 22, 1991, is counted in the statistical battle being waged against illiteracy.¹²⁹ Presently, the *Service National d’Alphabétisation* collects and incorporates the numbers of students who have become literate in N’ko into their literacy statistics. Announcements concerning N’ko celebrations like Founder’s Day on April 14 and conferences like the 1989 Conference on N’ko held at the Julius Nyerere University in Kankan, or else association meetings and general publicity

are published in journals, announced on television, and heard on the radio. Since 1993 another NGO, the *Union Manden*, has been working to protect, preserve, and promote Mande culture in the Republic of Guinea. In 1994 they identified N'ko as a valuable cultural component, and they hold N'ko classes on Friday afternoons in Conakry. However, July of 1994 witnessed the official censure of the *Union Manden* for its political overtones because it has aligned itself with the predominantly Mande political party of Alpha Condé, the Rassemblement du Peuple Guinéen (RPG), and in so doing, it caused Lansana Conté's government to forbid its activities in 1994.¹³⁰ Despite its relatively short time on the scene, the *Union Manden* may become ultimately more important than ICRA-N'KO in introducing the N'ko alphabet. Because if this ban is enforced, then the *Union Manden* will be driven underground. Although technically outlawed, the *Union Manden* continues its activities by promoting N'ko education and by communicating in N'ko itself. They have promoted N'ko in the *Belentigui*, a Mande cultural magazine that they began publishing in June 1994.¹³¹

Conclusion

Although a textured fabric of discourses defines Mande identity today, this community's identity has been articulated through a process in which the consonance of a resonant culture has been compromised by the dissonant actions of vivid historic actors since its empire period. Mande personalities such as Sundiata, Mansa Musa, Samori Touré, and Souleymane Kanté have been joined by foreign interlopers Louis Archinard, Maruice Delafosse, Louis Faidherbe, Henri Labouret, Charles Monteil, and William Ponty in a debate over Mande identity. By incorporating new ideas and technologies, Mande intellectuals have been compelled to create an identity consistent with modern changing cultural values. As Mande culture has accommodated and associated with change, various streams of discourse have emerged which add to the articulation of Mande identity. The latest discourse to address the debate over cultural identity comes from the promoters of N'ko literacy.

Until recently, there was no single force that had the potential to unify the transnational, Mande-speaking populations of West Africa. While they possess a general sense of cultural, linguistic, and historical identity, they have not in the past had a universal term to express the unity of their cluster of peoples and languages.¹³² It is true, however, that many Mande speakers had been unified in the Mali empire, and its spoken language was important to their sense of identity. The words of the Sundiata epic have become important in creating a memory of shared Mande history and in placing a value on orally transmitted knowledge in

the Mande language. The Mande trade diaspora helped to spread this sense of shared history over a whole area, within which people preserve memories of their heroic and historic past. After the empire's decline, however, many Mande speakers have lived under the governance of people speaking other languages. In addition, the most prestigious languages—those of domination and control—were often the written ones. The absence of Mande language literacy was a mark of subordination. In the latest period of European domination, any possibility of a Mande-based political challenge was reduced by the systematic subdivision of Mande speakers into small unrelated units. The French were exceptionally aggressive in carrying out this subdivision. The imaginary lines that served to divide the colonies of French West Africa were drawn as if they were designed to cut out the heart of the Mande heartland. Each small Mande group, however, has the potential to join together through N'ko into one large and formidable political unit.

As a result, the Maninka speakers of Guinea have taken the initiative in promoting Mande cultural identity across the wider Mande-speaking world. Seeing themselves as occupying the core of the Mande world, they have embarked upon a campaign to forge a cultural identity which offers cultural unity. The commonality of language and of an heroic and historic past, however, were insufficient in the past to serve as a catalyst for a Mande unity. So the Maninka speakers are now using a new "secret" weapon which is an indigenous written form of the Mande languages—the N'ko alphabet.

Although N'ko is based on Maninka, the alphabet is designed so that its graphemes are universally understood by Mande speakers, just as Chinese ones are understood by speakers of China's various languages. According to the expressed reasons of its inventor Souleymane Kanté, Mande speakers will be able to communicate readily with one another despite their divergent languages. The present campaign loudly articulates a cultural motivation for N'ko literacy. Softer voices in the background, however, whisper the potential for broader political possibilities.

Notes

¹ For more information on the Mande language family see *African Community Languages and their use in Literacy and Education: A Regional Survey*, (Dakar: UNESCO: 1985), *African Languages: Proceedings of the Meeting of Experts on the Use of the Regional and Sub-regional African Languages as Media of Culture and Communication with the Continent Bamako, Mali, 18–22 June 1979* (Paris: UNDP, 1981), Guy Atkins, ed., *Manding Art and Civilization* (London: Studio International, 1972), Charles Bird, John Hutchinson, and Mamadou Kanté, *An Ka Bamanakan Kalan: Introductory*

Bambara, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Linguistics Club, 1977), David Dalby, ed. *Language and History in Africa*, (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1970) Reed F. Stewart, "Mande-speaking Peoples of West Africa: Study of Culture Change along Language and Environmental Continua," Ph.D. Dissertation, Clark University 1986, (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilm International, 1994).

² D.T. Niane, *The Epic of Sundiata*

³ David Dalby, "A Survey of the Indigenous Scripts of Liberia and Sierra Leone: Vai, Mende, Loma, Kpelle, and Bassa, *African Language Studies*, VIII, 1967, pp. 4–18.

⁴ Dalby, pp. 2–4.

⁵ As a part of interview 84, August 15, 1994, in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, I visited N'ko schools at Abobo, Treicheville, and Koumassi, and I witnessed the application of the N'ko alphabet for transcribing language into written communication.

⁶ *African Community Languages and their Use in Literacy and Education: A Regional Survey*, (Dakar: UNESCO, March 1985), p. 42.

⁷ Group interview 33, May 8, 1993, in Kankan, Guinea.

⁸ Group interview 33, May 8, 1993, in Kankan, Guinea.

⁹ Group interview 33, May 8, 1993, in Kankan, Guinea.

¹⁰ David Dalby, "Who are the Manding?" in *Manding Art and Civilization*, ed. Guy Atkins (London: studio International, 1972) p.4.

¹¹ Diouldé Laye, "The Use of Inter-African Languages of Communication," in *African Languages: Proceedings of the Meeting of Experts on the Use of the Regional or Sub-regional African Languages as Media of Culture and Communication with the Continent Bamako (Mali), 18–22 June 1979*, (Paris: UNDP, 1979) pp. 96–97.

¹² *African Community Languages and their use in Literacy and Education*, (Dakar: UNESCO, 1985) pp. 29, 37, 42, 48, 59–62, 64, 66–69 and Christopher Moseley and R.E. Asher, *Atlas of the World's Languages*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 296–301 and Map numbers 107–113.

¹³ Bird, Hutchinson, and Kanté, p. 2.

¹⁴ The Niger River is a composite of two rivers that came together as a result of desertification. The Djoliba River, whose source was in the Fouta Djallon, flowed northeast emptying into a salt water lake, Azawad. The Quorra River's source was in the Adrar Mountains and flowed southwest into the Gulf of Guinea. Sanche de Gramont, *The Strong Brown God: The Story of the Niger River*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976), p. 27.

¹⁵ Daniel F. McCall, "The Cultural Map and Time-Profile of the Mande-speaking People" in *Papers on the Manding*, ed. Carleton T. Hodge, (The Hague, The Netherlands: Indiana University, 1971), p. 60.

¹⁶ McCall (p. 65) compares this with the toll-exacting activity of the robber barons on the Rhine River.

¹⁷ Yves Person, *Samori: Une Révolution Dyula*, Tome I, (Dakar: IFAN, 1968), p. 47.

¹⁸ McCall (p. 63) describes Mande access to the following three types of horses: the Barbary horse-trade from Morocco, a mixed breed of Arabian horse from the central Sudan, and indigenous ‘ponies’ from Cayor (Senegal), Bob (Burkina Faso), and Cotokoli (Northern Benin).

¹⁹ McCall (p. 67) relays that Al-Idrissi reported the reign of Muslim Kings.

²⁰ Bamana means “accept no master.” McCall, p. 69.

²¹ according to oral tradition, Sundiata sent his general Tiramangan Traoré to conquer the king of the Wolof speakers who had killed Malian emissaries sent to purchase horses. Traoré’s campaign led a Mande-speaking migration into the Senegambia. Traoré defeated the Wolof empire and established his capital at Kansala.

²² For information on the Kaabu Empire, see Djibril Tamsir Niane, *Histoire des Mandingues de l’Ouest: Le Royaume du Gabou*, (Paris: Editions Karthala, 1989).

²³ For further information on the Jakhanke see Lamin Sanneh, *The Jakhanke Muslim Clerics: A Religious and Historical Study of Islam in the Senegambia*, (New York: Lanham, 1989).

²⁴ This group would include Melville Herskovitz, Jacques Maquet, Warren D’Azevedo, and geographers William Morgan and John Pugh.

²⁵ The scholars presenting papers on Mande culture at this conference include David Dalby, Charles S. Bird, Daniel F. McCall, Nicholas S. Hopkins, and Labelle Prussin. Together with their colleagues, they established the basis for the scholarly work currently encouraged by MANSA, the Mande Studies Association.

²⁶ Scholars who promote the concept of cultural coherence are represented by David Dalby, Robert Launay, and Kenneth Wylie.

²⁷ Quoted from the booklet prepared for the Conference on Manding Studies, *Manding: Focus on an African Civilization*, Guy Atkins, ed., (London: SOAS, 1972).

²⁸ During my research in Kankan, from September 1992 until July 1993, I learned about the function and importance of the *sédés* to Maninka society from informants.

²⁹ Although I did not participate, I was present at *sédé* meetings. I did, however, have the opportunity to join the women’s *sédés* in dancing the Mamaya in Kankan, Tuesday, May 18, 1993.

³⁰ I was invited to visit the village of Sanana to observe the celebration that accompanied the custodial change from one *sédé* to another from

January 21–22, 1993. Informants explained the significance of the celebration and the role of the *sédé*.

³¹ Reed F. Stewart, "Mande-speaking Peoples of West Africa: Study of Culture Change along Language and Environmental Continua," Ph.D. Dissertation, Clark University, 1986, (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilm International, 1994), pp. 130–135. Stewart's methodology involved interviewing individuals from both Mande-speaking and non-Mande-speaking communities and creating comparables for the six cultural issues sampled by his study. His dissertation supports his findings with various tables, maps, figures, and charts.

³² Patrick R. McNaughton, *The Mande Blacksmiths: Knowledge, Power, and Art in West Africa*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 13.

³³ Stewart, pp. 126–130.

³⁴ Peter Burke, "Introduction," *The Social History of Language*, eds. Peter Burke and Roy Porter, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p.1.

³⁵ Justin Willis, "The Makings of a Tribe: Bondei Identities and Histories," *Journal of African History*, 33 (1992):191.

³⁶ Louis Brenner defines identity as "the process of naming: naming of self, naming of others, and naming by others." *Muslim Identity and Social Change in Sub-Saharan Africa*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993) p. 1.

³⁷ Yves Person states that language is the first consciousness of cultural identity and that all of culture is personified by that language, p. 47.

³⁸ Thomas K. Fitzgerald, *Metaphors of Identity: A Culture-Communication Dialogue*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 19) p. 61.

³⁹ Jay L. Robinson, "The Social Context of Literacy," in *Perspectives on Literacy*, eds. Eugene R. Kintgen, Barry M. Kroll, and Mike Rose, (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988) p. 243; Fitzgerald, p. 61.

⁴⁰ David D. Laitin, *Language Repertoires and State Construction in Africa*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 28.

⁴¹ Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the World and the World*, (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc., 1987), p. 53.

⁴² Leroy Vail asserts that language stands at the core of the cultural symbols that make up identity. Leroy Vail (ed.) *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), p. 12.

⁴³ Vail, p. 7.

⁴⁴ Vail, p. 11.

⁴⁵ Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990) pp. 17–18.

⁴⁶ David William Cohen and E.S. Atieno Odhiambo, *Siaya: The Historical Anthropology of an African Landscape*, (London: James Currey, 1988), p. 2.

⁴⁷ Burke, p. 13.

⁴⁸ Brenner (p. 59) asserts that identities are constantly being constructed and reconstructed based on perceived aims, needs, and constraints.

⁴⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983), p. 6.

⁵⁰ E.D. Hirsch, Jr. asserts “a nation’s language can be regarded as a part of its culture, or conversely, its culture can be regarded as the totality of its language.” *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Co., 1987), p. 83.

⁵¹ Latin, p. 11.

⁵² Anderson (p. 6) cites Ernest Gellner.

⁵³ Kefing Condé, professor of History at Gamal Adel Nasser University in Conakry and an expert on the history of Kankan from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries; Capitaine Binger identified the individual routes that passed through Kankan in *Du Niger au Golfe de Guinée par le Pays de Kong et le Mossi (1887–1889)*, Tome I, (Paris: Librairie Hachette, et Cie., 1892) , p. 131.

⁵⁴ George E. Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa 1000–1630*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 49–57, 60, 69.

⁵⁵ Capitaine Binger, pp. 128–129.

⁵⁶ Brooks, p. 55.

⁵⁷ Humblot, “Kankan: Métropole de la Haute-Guinée,” *L’Afrique Française: Renseignements Coloniaux et Documents*, No. 6, juin 1921, p. 153.

⁵⁸ Brooks, pp. 115–116.

⁵⁹ Humblot (p. 139) recounts the blend of indigenous African and Islamic culture.

⁶⁰ Brooks, p. 116.

⁶¹ Brooks, p. 117.

⁶² Kefing Condé says that the Maninka-Mory were originally Sarakollés from the Ghana empire. They came from Djafunun. The term originates from “Maninka la mory” or “Marabouts des Maninka” which became the contraction Maninka-Mory. Humblot (p. 137) described the origins of the Maninka-Mory as Diafonou. The ancestors were Soninké-speaking Muslims who settled in Kankan through small, successive migrations.

⁶³ Kefing Condé.

⁶⁴ Fapoutan Tounkara, “La Société traditionnelle Maninka face au Christianisme (du XIX^e siècle à l’Independence Guinéenne 1958),” Memoire, Université Julius Nyerere de Kankan, October 6, 1990, p.13.

⁶⁵ Humblot (p. 139) indicated that the marabouts held an increasingly important role in the community.

⁶⁶ Boundiala Condé, "L'Université traditionnelle Coranique de Kankan des origines à l'implantation coloniale," Memoire, Université Julius Nyerere de Kankan, 1992, pp. 19–21.

⁶⁷ Jack Goody, "The Impact of Islamic Writing on the Oral Cultures of West Africa," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 11, 1971:460–461.

⁶⁸ According to Jeanne S. Chall's levels of literacy discussed in Chapter 2, stage two literacy represents the ability to read familiar and memorized texts. By this definition, students who memorized the Quran and could "read" it because reading memorized text are considered literate, albeit at a lower stage of literacy than someone who is by today's definition functionally literate in Arabic, i.e. at level three. Cited by Daniel P. Resnick and Lauren B. Resnick, "The Nature of Literacy: An Historical Exploration," *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 47, no. 3, 1977:383–384.

⁶⁹ Walter J. Ong, "Reading, Technology, and Human Consciousness," in *Literacy as a Human Problem*, ed. James C. Raymond, (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1982), pp. 174–177; Germain Doualamou, *Langues Guinéennes et Education*, (Paris: UNDP, 1980), p. 20.

⁷⁰ Students were allocated according to region: 300 to Kankan and over 1200 to Soumankoyin according to interview 35, May 11, 1993, in Kankan. In an interview with Souleymane Kanté's brothers, the story about Souleymane Kanté's father being transplanted to Soumankoyin from Ségou in what is now Mali, reflects Samori's role in the redistribution of students; Interview 26, April 26, 1993; and in group interview 27, April 26, 1993, in Soumankoyin-Kölönin.

⁷¹ A descendant of Kankan royalty and the current Chief of the Kaba family and of the Timbo Quarter, related the story that has been passed down. Interview 06, March 4, 1993, in Kankan. At eighty-four years of age, he belonged to the first generation to hear the story from the actual participants.

⁷² Kefing Condé.

⁷³ The following informants are merchants who have documented some of the time that they spent within the trade network. The merchants in group interview 08, March 8, 1993, in Karifamoriah, spent time in 1949 in Côte d'Ivoire and time in 1959 in Senegal. In interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan, the informant spent time in 1949 in Côte d'Ivoire and time in 1955 in Sierra Leone. In interview 20, April 7, 1993, in Kankan, this informant spent 1940–1945 in Bamako, Mali, and then in 1952 he spent time in Côte d'Ivoire. In interview 29, May 3, 1993, in Kankan, the informant spent time in 1948 in Mali, time in 1949 in Côte d'Ivoire, 1954–1955 in Ghana, and time in 1956 in Lomé, Togo, and Cotonou,

Benin. In interview 32, May 8, 1993, in Kankan, the informant spent time in 1941 in Bamako, Mali, and in Dakar, Senegal, and time in 1955 in Sierra Leone. In group interview 33, May 8, 1993, in Kankan, one member spent time in 1942 in Bamako, Mali, time in 1944 in Mopti, Mali, and twenty years in Bobo Dioulasso, Burkina Faso beginning in 1947. In group interview 43, May 18, 1993, one member spent 1930–1935 in Sierra Leone, 1946–1952 in Côte d'Ivoire, and 1953–1954 in Senegal. In interview 54, June 23, 1993, in Kankan the informant spent time in 1952 in Bouaké, Côte d'Ivoire, time in 1953 in Dakar, Senegal, and some time in 1954 in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.

⁷⁴ One of the students who had walked to Bouaké with Kanté detailed the trip. Group interview 18, April 5, 1993, in Balandou.

⁷⁵ Governor of Guinea Crocicchia letter to the Gouverneur General Haute Commissaire de l'Afrique Française, September 7, 1942, on the movement of peoples along the Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea borders. This one example found in the Archives l'Afrique Occidentale Française, 21 G, 62 (17).

⁷⁶ Jean Suret-Canale says that in 1900 there were fifty French companies in Guinea, the most important of which was Compagnie Française de l'Afrique Occidentale (CFAO) from Marseille. Compagnie du Niger Français, Chavanel, Peyrisac from Bordeaux, and Union Comptoirs d'Outre-mer (UNICOMER) represented other important firms. Other companies represented foreign interests were Pelizaeus from Bremen, Germany, Société Commerciale de l'Ouest Africain (SCOA) from Switzerland, and Paterson-Zochonis from Manchester, England. Most of the commercial trade was in the hands of the British houses in Manchester. Jean Suret-Canale, *La Guinée* (Paris: éditions Sociales, 1970), pp. 108–113.

⁷⁷ Interview 10, March 13, 1993; interview 13, March 18, 1993; and interview 42, May 17, 1993, all in Kankan.

⁷⁸ Many Maninka speakers rejected the schools because they taught Maninka children to take on the character of the "Tubabs" (whites). According to the informants in group interview 46, June 19, 1994, in Kankan, when forced to send children to the colonial schools, some Maninka speakers sent the children of families that in the period before the abolition of slavery had been associated with their family as slaves. Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc., 1987), p. 13.

⁷⁹ Ong, pp. 174–177.

⁸⁰ Many of the observations about Yoruba come from informal conversations with Olaniyi (Niyi) Oladeji, late professor at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife, Nigeria.

⁸¹ When attending Cairo's Al-Ahaz'ar University in the late 1950s, one informant in group interview 46, June 19, 1993, in Kankan, corroborated the existence of the document read by Souleymane Kanté because he had read it. While most informants can give their approximation of the text, this was one of the few informants who could identify the author and the title of the work in which the often-quoted text was located.

⁸² The text is remembered by informants in group interview 08, March 8, 1993 in Karifamoriah, as "The blacks are absolutely worthless, despite their numbers, because they have no written language. Blacks are comparable to birds: a flock of birds is more valuable than one black person; on the other hand, blacks outnumber birds. Blacks don't have an alphabet so their speech is like the cries of a bird—impossible to transcribe."

⁸³ Diaka Laye Kaba, "Souleymane Kanté: l'Inventeur de l'Alphabet N'ko," *L'Éducateur: Trimestriel Pédagogique des Enseignants de Guinée*, No. 11 & 12, avril–juin, juillet–septembre, 1992, p. 33.

⁸⁴ The unique characters of the alphabet together with the diacritical marks help to express tonality.

⁸⁵ Examples of this are found in interview 05, March 3, 1993 and interview 35, May 11, 1993, both in Kankan.

⁸⁶ Kanté has been called a "savant," one who can only be taught by God. The informant said that God taught Souleymane Kanté N'ko. Interview 15, March 20, 1993, in Kankan.

⁸⁷ Examples of this can be found in group interview 08, March 8, 1993, in Karifamoriah, and in interview 05, March 3, 1993, in Kankan.

⁸⁸ Souleymane Kanté reportedly said that the importance of writing was to keep secrets. Kanté told the story that a man wrote a letter that contained some private matters to his friend, but his friend could not read. So the friend took the letter to someone who could read it to him. When the contents of the letter were known, the man lost his job because of the ignorance of another. Interview 05, March 3, 1993, in Kankan.

⁸⁹ Informants discussed the debate around the invention of the alphabet. Group interview 08, March 8, 1993, in Karifamoriah.

⁹⁰ There are no references to N'ko in any of the official colonial records that I examined in either the National and Regional Archives of Guinea or the Archives of French West Africa (AOF) located in Dakar, Senegal.

⁹¹ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. x–xiii.

⁹² Humbot (p. 139) observed that the "whites" introduced confusion among the indigenous peoples by directly imposing their own customs and morals.

⁹³ A retired teacher said that the methods employed by the *médresa* were the same as those used in the French colonial schools. Interview 10, March 13, 1993, in Kankan.

⁹⁴ André Lewin, *La Guinée*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1984), p. 61.

⁹⁵ Informants said that while they favored independence from France, they did not want to break up the regional unit known as Francophone West Africa. Examples of this sentiment can be found in interview 16, March 21, 1993, in Kankan and interview 42, May 17, 1993 in Kankan. One person remembered that Charles de Gaulle had promised the colonies independence. Interview 11, March 15, 1993, in Kankan.

⁹⁶ Ruth Morgenthau, *Political Parties in French-speaking West Africa*, (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 231.

⁹⁷ The characterizations of the Sékou Touré period are distilled from the observations offered by my informants. Few details concerning Sékou Touré's First Republic (1958–1984) are available because First Republic documents have not been collected, sorted, and catalogued in Guinea's National Archives.

⁹⁸ Morgenthau, pp. 229, 234.

⁹⁹ Merchants described the status of Kankan's economy. They discussed Kankan's commercial prosperity immediately after independence and before the imposition of the Loi-Cadre of 1964. Group interview 08, March 8, 1993, in Karifamoriah and interview 20, April 7, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁰⁰ The Soti of Kankan explained that everyone was happy about the Europeans leaving and that the suppression of trade was a "big surprise to everyone." Interview 53, June 23, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁰¹ According to one informant, when the Europeans left, their employees became the merchants. Interview 42, May 17, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁰² Informants discussed this flurry of activity in group interview 08, March 8, 1993, in Karifamoriah. This group created a "cooperative," while describing Souleymane Kanté as belonging to a "Société."

¹⁰³ This informant asserted that socialist/communist policies tried to bury commerce in Guinea. Interview 29, May 3, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁰⁴ The currency for most of Francophone West Africa is the CFA, the value of which is estimated in relation to the French Franc.

¹⁰⁵ The informant felt that France would re-colonize Guinea if Guineans continued to participate in the French economy by using French currency. Interview 14, March 14, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁰⁶ Group interview 08, March 8, 1993, in Karifamoriah.

¹⁰⁷ This did not affect the petit marché in which local producers sold food items or craft products. This was a cessation of private international trade.

¹⁰⁸ Lewin, p. 72.

¹⁰⁹ Interview 58, June 27, 1993, in Kankan; and interview 53, June 23, 1993, in Kankan, the Soti declared that Kankan was almost empty.

¹¹⁰ The national economic policies were a catastrophe for Kankan. So the merchants conducted their businesses clandestinely according to the informant in interview 03, February 28, 1993, in Kankan. In interview 07, March 6, 1993, in Kankan, the informant explained how civil servants with access to such things as fuel redirected that commodity to the black market.

¹¹¹ Interview 29, May 3, 1993, in Kankan.

¹¹² The informant said that only by the grace of God were the richer merchants able to escape. Interview 20, April 7, 1993, in Kankan. Those merchants without financial recourse had to go back to the fields.

¹¹³ After independence, the "Union Culturelle Islamique" held a congress in Conakry. The participants discussed their strong support for Touré. They saw themselves as collaborating with the politicians bringing the independence government into power. The Congress petitioned the government to apply Islamic law in Guinea, making it an Islamic state. Souleymane Kanté participated in this conference. Shortly after the congress, all congress participants were arrested and spent six to eight days in prison. Interview 32, May 9, 1993, in Kankan: and interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan.

¹¹⁴ Lewin, p. 119.

¹¹⁵ Touré built the paved national road only as far as Faranah. He diverted the hydro-electric power due to go to Kouroussa to Faranah. He built an airport to international specifications there. Faranah is the site of a large military base.

¹¹⁶ Prior to independence, many Guineans were dispersed throughout West Africa. Some were employed by the French as bureaucrats, teachers, or as railroad transportation workers. Others, such as the large number of Maninka speakers, were dispersed along West African trade routes. For example, in interview 07, March 6, 1993, in Kankan, my informant said that his father was the railroad station master at Bobo Dioulasso, Burkina Faso in 1944.

¹¹⁷ Two of Souleymane Kanté's contemporaries in Côte d'Ivoire described his activities there prior to, during, and after the invention of the alphabet. Group interview 84, August 15, 1994, in Abidjan.

¹¹⁸ Merchants were the first to accept N'ko, and they brought it back to their homes in countries located throughout the Mande trade network. According to the informant in interview 32, May 8, 1993, in Kankan, N'ko returned to Kankan with the merchants returning from Côte d'Ivoire.

¹¹⁹ David D. Laitin, *Language Repertoires and State Construction in Africa*, (New York: Cambridge University Press 1992), pp. 8–12.

¹²⁰ The adoption of Portuguese by the independence government of Mozambique is another example of this type of colonial language and literacy adoption. Judith Marshall, *Literacy, Power, and Democracy in*

Mozambique: The Governance of Learning from Colonization to the Present, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 107–108.

¹²¹ Conferences at Addis Ababa 1961 and 1966.

¹²² Meeting of the experts on the "use of Mother-tongue for Literacy" at Ibadan, Nigeria, 1964 and the West African Linguistics Congress, at Accra, 1965.

¹²³ Sékou Touré, "Entretien du Chef de l'Etat avec les participants au séminaire de l'UNESCO sur le Langues Africaines," *Horoya*, No. 2889 du 25 au 31 October 1981, pp. 13–16.

¹²⁴ UNESCO, *The Experimental World Literacy Programme: A Critical Assessment*, (Paris: The UNESCO Press, 1976), p. 42.

¹²⁵ Mohamed Lamine Sano, "Aperçu Historique sur l'Utilisation des Langues Nationales en République de Guinée," Conakry, Republic of Guinea, 1992, pp. 3–4.

¹²⁶ An educator who was a political representative of the PDG at the local level, and who was an N'ko teacher and member of the N'ko organization explained in great detail the relationship between the educational and political aspects of the National Language Program and Souleymane Kanté's role in helping to standardize the Maninka language to the Roman Alphabet. Interviews 34 and 35, May 10, 1993 and June 24, 1993, both in Kankan.

¹²⁷ Ministère du Domaine de l'Education et de la Culture, "Avis de Réunion," Conakry, September 1976, documents Souleymane Kanté's role as national advisor on the standardization of the Maninka language to the Roman Alphabet.

¹²⁸ President Conté distinguishes the Second Republic as the military take-over after Sékou Touré's death until the elections of December 1993. He says that the elections demarcate the beginning of the Third Republic because he was voted into office.

¹²⁹ Interview 68, July 17, 1993, in Conakry.

¹³⁰ David Conrad, "MANSA Newsletter," No.24, 1994, p. 4.

¹³¹ In the *Belentigui*, Magazine Culturel Manding, no. 01, juin 1994, the title is written in N'ko below it; page 8 is devoted to literacy and the "Programme d'Action de l'ICRA-N'KO," and page 9 provides a hand-written chart of the N'ko alphabet presented by one of my informants. Other cultural subjects in this issue include the story of Kankou Moussa, Mande proverbs, and modern social issues.

¹³² Dalby, "Nomenclature," p. 2.

Chapter 3

Historic Kankan — A Regional History

Souleymane Kanté (1922–1987) was born in the southern marches of the Mande heartland. A thinker in every respect, he laid the ground work for a linguistic campaign that would reunify the region under Mande rule. Because of Kanté's actions this event eventually manifested itself as a period of Mande enlightenment. Through his thorough knowledge of language, Kanté exhibited the attributes of a "vernacular intellectual," a term derived from Steve Feierman's paradigm of "peasant intellectual." Likely not in a conscious manner, his initial linguistic focus must be viewed as a watershed event in the process of Mande nationalism. If one accepts George Orwell's contention that language is politics, Kanté's invention of an alphabet has given speakers of Mande languages the ability to offer their voice in the historical record, thus adding their normative paradigms of Mande culture to ideas of nation building.¹ Furthermore, if one purpose of language is to establish levels of power and control, then one has to view Kanté's N'ko as an event having political repercussions, for it is through his creation that the speakers of Mande languages have joined the annals of history. Not since Samori Touré (1870–1898) has a significant region of West Africa unified under Mande leadership. But unlike Touré who offered unity through the barrel a gun, Kanté unified the region with the barrel of a pen. The new campaign is intellectual and driven by the force of cultural identity; it is a literacy campaign whose success is determined by first principle concepts. In teaching N'ko its promoters are also establishing who are the Mande, where do they come from, and where are they headed.

This chapter addresses concepts of origin by sketching the history of the Maninka speakers of Kankan and its environs, the region from which Souleymane Kanté emerged as a vernacular intellectual leader and from which emerged the N'ko grassroots movement that ushered in a period of Mande learning which is helping define Mande nationalist concerns.

The pre-Samori period, 1775–1870

Kankan became the capital of the Baté region just prior to the reign of Samori Touré.² During the period immediately prior to the era of Samori, Kankan had been a theocratic state. The rulership of Kankan had been hotly contested by non-Muslims and Muslims in the eighteenth century.³ Kankan's last general threat by non-Muslims had been Kankan's attack by Kondé Bourama who forced many Muslims, including the Kaba



The seven children of Amara Kanté, five boys and two girls, are pictured here. Souleymane Kanté is standing in the back row, second from the right. Photographer, unknown, no date.

family, to retreat into the hills of the Fouta Djallon. Besides creating regional insecurity, the belligerence resulted in the destruction of many Arabic documents and also the fiery destruction of Kankan, but Alpha Kabiné Kaba would eventually restore Kankan to its previous position as a theocratic state.⁴ His people, the Maninka-mory, created a cadre of intellectuals in the region through education and these Baté intellectuals controlled religious and administrative knowledge through the use of spoken and written Arabic. They also subscribed to a low-key promotion of their religion by gradually educating the region's population into the brotherhood of Islam.⁵

Until the introduction of the Tijaniyya Sufi Order by al-Hadj Oumar Taal in the nineteenth century, the Qadiriyya Sufi Order dominated the religious life in the Baté by drawing upon social, economic, and political interests to define itself. Qadiriyya scholars founded what they purported to be a pure Muslim community, and people joined voluntarily.^{6,7,8} The community excluded using violence in recruiting members to the brotherhood.⁹ The Tijaniyya sect of Al Hadj Oumar Taal, on the other hand, set itself apart in the Muslim community by offering a political alternative to the violence of *jihad* in its recruitment of non-Muslim converts. The Tijaniyya began drawing Muslim scholars through Taal's prolific writings explaining the essence of Tijani character. By redefining the Muslim character using Islamic law, the Tijani scholars portrayed a rejuvenated religion doing battle with non-believers. The intensive political struggle that occurred among Muslims resulted in a refocusing of community identity as a choice between Muslim and non-Muslim.¹⁰ As the Tijaniyya spread into Qadiriyya areas, Muslims from both orders learned to adopt attitudes of mutual tolerance.¹¹

Sociopolitical organization in the pre-Samorian era was derived from a blend of local and indigenous non-Islamic customs and by strengthening Quranic influences. Under the Islamic leadership of the Maninka-mory, Kankan became "...the religious, intellectual, and commercial center for all Dyula groups from the Upper Niger to the edge of the forest."¹² The political and administrative realm was a blend of local clan organization and the influence of Islamic law.¹³ The political administration for Kankan and the villages of the Baté was left to a gerontocracy. The chief, who was the eldest living descendant of the community's founder, administered Kankan. Assisting him in an advisory role were family and clan elders of the other founding families. They assured the dispensation of justice, the recruitment of labor for public works, the functioning of the law (including Islamic law) and the observance of local customs, and sometimes a syncretism of the two.¹⁴ The theocratic state established in Kankan in the late eighteenth century had ruled a much larger non-

Muslim population; not until the nineteenth century did the general population living in the savanna convert to Islam under the leadership of al-Hadj Oumar Taal and Samori Touré.

Supported by a well-watered savanna plateau, the economy of the Baté has been based for the whole of the present millennium on farming, animal grazing, fishing, hunting, artisan work, and commerce.¹⁵ Kankan's location on the Milo River placed it at the strategic intersection of trade routes connecting the Sahel and the forest. The Maninka-mory settlers, who were in ascendancy by the sixteenth century, increased Kankan's trade connection. The Maninka-speaking traders, known as the Dyula, traded products and spread Islam and the Maninka language from the savanna into the forest region.^{16,17} The Dyula moved products throughout the interior to exchange for trade goods at the coast, and in many cases, they handled credit arrangements with suppliers in the interior. Dyula traders made profits which sometimes reached from 300 to 400 percent.¹⁸

Islamic Mande settled, thrived, and formed a complex hierarchy along the banks of the Milo River.¹⁹ Their highest social class was that of the *nobles*. Its members were descendants of the founders of each village. To this group belonged the well-known Kaba family who founded the city of Kankan. Next in rank was the class of *freeman*. These were allied to the founding family by kinship or friendship. Generally, there was a pact among these families.²⁰ In Kankan, the family names Condé, Chérif, Touré, Diané, Fofana, Kakörö, Cissé, Wagué, Traoré, and Camara represent this group.²¹ The next social division included the small, endogamous pseudo-caste of the *jeliw* represented in Kankan by the names of Kouyaté and Dioubaté. Next came the *Nyamkala* or artisans representing the professions of potters, sculptors, and iron workers. The *captives*, those who had been brought back to Kankan as prisoners of war or people who could not pay their debts, filled the lowest social level and supplied manpower. The *captives* could purchase their freedom and often integrated themselves into the families of their owners by the third generation of association; they were replaced continually by future captives.²² *Captives* were used by merchants as porters in the long-distance trade. *Captives* controlled by the village king or chief could form a part of the military. Others with artisan skills made goods for sale, and their profits guaranteed them their freedom.²³

The distinctions between *freeman*, the caste-like groups of *jeliw*, *artisans*, and *captives* have been formally eliminated, but covertly remain as an attitude based on name or previous familial associations. A traditional form of social organization still extant today among the Maninka is the *sédé*, an *age-grade* association for both men and women. In Kankan proper,

one distinguishes five groups based upon age. Members meet regularly and work together for the mutual promotion of economic development and cultural conservation.²⁴

During its pre-Samorian period Kankan was best known for its Quranic schools. During the second half of the eighteenth century, Alpha Kabiné Kaba built Kankan's Grand Mosque and established a relationship with the Islamic empire of al-Hadj Oumar Taal in the Fouta Djallon.²⁵ Kankan's association with the Taal empire led to its transformation into a center for Quranic school education.²⁶ Tijani contact thus helped create a new educational structure remembered today as "l'Université Traditionnelle Coranique de Kankan."²⁷ The quality of education remarkably improved with the adaptation of the *Zawiya* school structure and a pedagogy derived from the Islamic scholars of the Fouta Djallon. Al Hadj Amadou Chérif was the first *marabout* to establish this high form of Quranic education for Kankan.

The central idea of the new educational structure revolved around a conceptualization of the term *Zawiya*, meaning *corner*, and it referred to a school's relationship to the mosque. The term also refers to a monastery where students would be secluded in order to learn.²⁸ Schools were placed on radial arms surrounding the Grand Mosque, and from 200 to 400 students lodged together at a special enclosure in the home of the teacher. Depending upon the depth and breadth of instruction requested by the parents, the period of instruction took from 7 to 17 years.²⁹

Réné Caillié visited Kankan in 1827, and, identifying it as capital of the Kankan District, he situated the town on the left bank of the Milo River which provided maintenance for the people through its seasonal flooding and its riverine trade network. Caillié described Kankan as a small town surrounded by a thick hedge and having two opposing east and west entrances. Caillié estimated the population of Kankan to be not more than 6,000 people living in a fertile plain. Fanning out from the town were the plantations with small slave villages called *ourondés*. Plantations produced yams, maize, rice, foigné, onions, pistachio-nuts, and gombo [today in Kankan, the term *gombo* means okra].³⁰ According to Caillié, the *dougou-tigi*, the chief, did not rule alone. He depended upon a council of elders who met together with him in the mosque.³¹ The meetings were orderly and subdued. The decisions were made slowly and cautiously to avoid errors in the decision-making process.³² While Caillié observed that the leadership of the community was Muslim, he also documented a large number of people from the countryside and from towns nearby who were not Muslims. Kankan was often at war with these communities in an effort to force their populations to accept Islam.³³

Posing as an Arab, Caillié seems to have spent much time in the Mosque. He describes the mosque's construction itself as earthen, which may have been the sahelian style of architecture of sun dried bricks with a stucco-like exterior; it had one solid wall that faced east and each of the other walls had doors. Its interior was arranged into corridors by the pillars that supported the roof. He reported that the women had their own mosque since they were not allowed to worship with the men. Women's mosques were constructed from straw which, Caillié commented, made them airy. Caillié described his participation in the Mosque's religious service, commenting that the prayers were short and that the mosque's spiritual leader read directly from the Quran.³⁴ In Kankan's market, which during this period was only held three times a week, Caillié witnessed the exchange of merchandise from as faraway as Sierra Leone, the Gambia, and Senegal. A major trade town on the route to Siguiri, Kankan benefited from its neighbor's wealth from the Bouré gold fields, but Caillié did not witness the regional gold trade because it was curtailed by a war between Kankan and Siguiri. He did point out a brisk trade between Kankan and its neighbors.³⁵

The Samori period, 1870–1890

Samori Touré conquered an enormous area with various Islamic traditions.³⁶ In the northern part of the Samori empire around Kankan, Islam became a powerful political force. In the southern part, Muslims lived under the political domination of non-Muslims, coexisting by inhabiting separate quarters of towns or villages.³⁷ Samori's empire reflected the cooperation between Muslims and non-Muslims; it offered a peaceful environment that ensured the security of the trade routes and thus the financial security of the region.³⁸

Samori chose Islam as the unifying force with which to legitimatize his rule over the empire and bind together the people of the region. He hoped to consolidate his empire in order to face the threat of French empire builders. Kankan was added to his empire, and the Kaba family was driven into exile in 1881.³⁹ Samori then declared his conversion to Islam and began to add Islamic advisors to his council. Under the tutelage of the most respected *Qadiriyya Shaykh* of Kankan, Karamö Sidiki Chérif, Samori achieved a senior level of Islamic education, and he commanded that his subjects pay their village *shaykhs*. Wanting to politicize Islam, he added religious teachers as auxiliaries to his political agents.^{40,41} These auxiliaries began a subtle Islamization of all the children of the empire. Samori took the title of *Alnami* (leader) at the close of Ramadan in 1884. In November 1886 he forced the conversion to Islam of all his subjects, including his own family.⁴²

Throughout Samori's empire, the children in the vicinity of Kankan and the Baté region were placed into the schools of Islamic scholars such as Camarala, Tourela, Chérifoula, and Kabada. Amara Kanté, Souleymane's father, was assigned to the school of Sidikiba Chérif, one of the schools in Soumankoyin, located thirteen kilometers outside of Kankan.

The Kanté family history begins in Mali, a history whose undercurrent seems to be their strong love of learning. Amara Kanté's grandfather was Mory Kanté and his father was named Amidou Kanté. His mother was Nanyalen Kaba Kourouma from Sabadou Sansandö.^{43,44} Amara's youngest son claims that his grandfather Amidou came from Kénékou located about 70 kilometers from Bamako.⁴⁵ Another son specifically identified Ségu in Mali as the family's ancestral home.⁴⁶ Mory and his son were educated merchants engaged in selling herds of cattle, sheep, and goats. Amara Kanté came from the region of Wassolon.⁴⁷ He ultimately emerged as an innovator in his own right, shaping the cultural politics of Islam and foreshadowing Souleymane's contribution. One family member reported that during the period of Samori's war, Amidou and his family were in Wassolon where he and his wife died at a young age after a disease had decimated their herds.⁴⁸ Another family member reported that as the family's first born male, Amara was taken away after Samori had subdued the region.⁴⁹ Amara's status as the only male child among ten children in the family is corroborated by his only surviving wife.⁵⁰ Samori is reported to have moved all of these children, including Amara, from the Wassolon region to be placed in the Baté Quranic schools.

Quranic education was carried out by scholars who were expert teachers in specific disciplines of Islam.⁵¹ Typically, a student whose family had chosen for him the life of a scholar would have studied with one teacher until he reached the limit of his tutor's knowledge; then he would go to another instructor.⁵² Amara was such a student. His children say that he studied with one Quranic scholar in Soumankoyin until he could teach as well as his mentor. Then he moved around to other learned men for further education and to master additional texts.⁵³ One son claimed that Amara repeated this learning process at 110 different schools in the region.⁵⁴ Another son added that Amara's quest was a great adventure in search of knowledge.⁵⁵

Family members as a whole remembered that by the time Amara opened his own school in Soumankoyin, he had a well established scholarly reputation throughout the region. After three years, Amara relocated his school to Kölönin because of the large number of students who sought him out.⁵⁶ In Amara's time, instruction at the eight Quranic schools in the area was considered an arduous task which took many years. Amara developed a methodology which simplified instruction, and he claimed

to impart in three years at his Soumankoyin-Kölönin school a knowledge equivalent to nine years at the other schools of the Baté.⁵⁷ He thus improved the method of learning by reducing the amount of time necessary to learn and translate Arabic, thus demystifying Islam and the craft of its teachers.

French colonial rule, 1890–1922

When the Kaba family turned to the French for military assistance against Samori in 1890, that year Kankan was absorbed into the French Soudan (present-day Mali). Later that same year the French transferred the region to the political administration of Rivière du Sud (present-day Guinea), which had a coastal orientation.⁵⁸ As a result of the decree of December 17, 1891, Kankan and the Baté, Sigiri, Kouroussa, and Dinguiraye (the southern Sudan) which had earlier belonged to the larger Mande-speaking populations of the French Sudan were stripped from the greater Sudan and added to Guinée Française.⁵⁹ Regions to the south such as Beyla, N'Zérékoré, Macenta, and Kissidougou were added to Guinée Française in 1891.⁶⁰ The *Cercle de Faranah*, which controlled the routes into Sierra Leone, was moved from the Sudan and added to Guinée Française by 1895.⁶¹ Finally, Guinée Française took its ultimate shape with the addition of the Fouta Djallon in 1896 after the French defeated Alamami Bokar Biro of Poredaka.⁶² All the areas joined the larger block of French directed lands and peoples of West Africa designated as *l'Afrique Occidentale Française* (AOF) in 1895.⁶³ The decree of October 17, 1899 defines Guinea's permanent borders.⁶⁴

The French divided and conquered the region by grouping together assorted blocks of diverse populations into Guinée Française. The colony's 20 plus linguistic groups found it difficult to fight against French domination. In addition, competing forms of Islam and subtle antagonisms among the faithful diverted attention from the French. Maninka speakers in the southern Sudan (Haute-Guinée) were separated from Mande speakers in Mali's heartland and hence rendered impotent in any effort to unify against the French empire.⁶⁵ Another factor, the emancipation of slaves and captives in the early twentieth century, generated allies for the French among the newly created population of freedmen. The French also created allies by training a cadre of students loyal to their administration; students were transformed by education into civil servants and were entrusted with the implementation of governmental policy. Thus, they would no longer answer to local customs and would undermine the cohesiveness of social and cultural organizations in the region.⁶⁶

The French colonial rule created a hierarchical administration, and from 1904 to 1914 French direct rule usurped the political and adminis-

trative legitimacy of local leaders.⁶⁷ The Governor-General governed the AOF. Each regional subdivision or colony had a lieutenant-governor. Colonies were autonomous, and each governor was responsible for the local budget, taxation, and internal administration.⁶⁸ Guinée Française, Côte d'Ivoire, and Dahomey (today Benin) became separate and distinct colonies on March 10, 1893.⁶⁹ Noël Ballay was made Guinea's first governor. He resided at Conakry on the Isle of Timbo.

Below the level of governor, a colony was divided into *cercles* each with its administrator who was initially a military commandant, and later a civilian administrator. His responsibilities included the appointment of African chiefs, the oversight of African civil servants, and the employment of local spies and informers.⁷⁰ Administrators, however, did not stay long enough at any one post to learn the local language or customs of the people for whom they were responsible. Postings were so frequent and languages so diverse that administrators had to rely upon interpreters for communication.⁷¹ During 70 years of French rule in the *Cercle* of Sigiri, for example, there were 71 administrators whose average length of tenure was 11 months.⁷²

Guinea consisted of 20 *cercles*, and each had a French administrator with an assistant, one or two commissioners of indigenous affairs, a military detachment, an interpreter, a communications agent, and other employees.⁷³ Among these, the *Cercle* Kankan was constituted by a decision of the Commandant Supérieur of the Sudan in 1891.⁷⁴ From April 1891 to January 1892 Kankan became the center of a regional military administration under Captain Besançon and Second Lieutenant Mangin, *adjoint*.⁷⁵ They communicated with the *chefs de canton* through an interpreter, a local Maninka speaker who had learned enough French to bridge the gap.

Cantons subdivided each *Cercle* and each had a local, indigenous representative who was responsible for being the liaison between the colonial administrator and the people. They collected taxes and recruited labor, and thus they usually became vastly unpopular with the community.⁷⁶ Building on the precedence of a public works' ethic and the slave tradition of the region, France imposed a policy of forced labor on its colony. For many communities in the southern Sudan these traditions and the influence of Dyula trade patterns, led to the use of forced labor for portage. No rivers flowed to Conakry, and this necessitated forced portage for transporting groundnuts from collection sites at Kouroussa and Kankan.⁷⁷

Although the canton was an alien political form for many of the people of Guinée Française, Governor-General William Ponty had adopted the canton concept from Samori; it was a management strategy based

upon the social constructs of Samori's empire. Samori had forced the local, legitimate *chefs de canton* of the southern Sudan to affirm his position of superiority over them.⁷⁸ Believing that Samori's structure of governance had been the norm for the region, Ponty continued Samori's policy of domination with one important change: the French selected their own *chefs de canton*. Because Ponty was intent upon destroying the indigenous political and social structure of the French Sudan, he reduced the powers of the chiefs by eliminating slaves. He thus reduced their wealth and then created new criteria for the selection of chiefs.⁷⁹

The canton as an agglomeration of villages was important to the economy of Mande life. The villages were grouped regionally into a *Kafu*, which became the model for the canton.⁸⁰ The leadership of the *Kafu* was normally bestowed upon individuals whose family had inherited the political rights of first settlement of the region.⁸¹ Under colonialism many of the *chefs de canton* were selected by the French by their willingness to collaborate with the colonial government rather than elected by the community from which they had legitimately received the status of chief. The French hoped to give the appearance of legitimate cooperation at the local level while at the same time grasping for tighter local social controls.

An agglomeration of neighboring villages became Kankan, with its leadership in the hands of the descendants of its founders. Each of its four original *quartiers* had a founding family leader who was assisted by elders. There was also the *Soti*, a town administrator who was advised by elders of the original founding families. Kankan was the only truly indigenous town in the region of the southern Sudan.⁸²

While colonial officers used French as the official language of spoken communication with local intermediaries in the early years of rule, they adopted Arabic as the official language of correspondence, since this was the existing form of written communication.⁸³ The French established a colonial educational system to train French-literate intermediaries who later became civil servants serving as liaisons between the colonial government and the general population.

French colonial education promoted the French language and a loyal, indigenous work force.⁸⁴ Graduates no longer fit into their indigenous society and, ironically, would never measure up to French standards. But the French succeeded by limiting the scope and content of colonial education by manipulating this new cadre of intellectuals.⁸⁵ Although many students, such as sons of chiefs, had to be forced to attend French public schools, the sons of captives or slaves, on the other hand, clamored to go in order to acquire parity in the newly evolving social structure.

French schools provided six years of education during which students learned to read, write, and calculate. They also taught labor skills deemed necessary to the proper functioning of the community. Other local level schools taught trades such as ironworking and carpentry to apprentices, while more advanced studies could be pursued in the capital of the colony. One school, for example, the *école primaire supérieur* (EPS) was an upper primary school. Entrance required a primary school certificate and a passing grade in a competitive entrance exam. The students who attended the terminal program of the EPS ended up being “low level clerks, teachers, or local administrative or commercial agents for European firms.”⁸⁶ Graduates from the academic section competed as candidates for the federal schools in Dakar, the Ecole William Ponty, a professional school, or else a school of medicine.⁸⁷

P. Humblot, one of Kankan’s administrators who wrote for a colonial publication, commented upon the educational opportunities available in Guinea during his visit in the early 1920s, indicating that each region had a school at the local level which granted an elementary certificate. He then specifically described the professional sections of the elementary schools in Conakry which offered special training for students who wished to be apprenticed in iron working, carpentry, wood working, and cabinet making. In another section on agriculture he adds that students learned about harvesting groundnuts and collecting rubber. Humblot estimated that 200 to 500 students attended this school.⁸⁸

The success of colonial education policy dealt a severe blow to Islam because in 1911 the colonial administration decreed that the official language of written correspondence between the metropole and the colonies would change from Arabic to French.⁸⁹ This dictum reflected the changing attitudes of the French toward Islam, one which had been engendered by the bitter, extended struggle against Muslim-led resistance in Algeria; the French feared recreating the conditions that would lead to a second Algerian-type war.⁹⁰ The previous policy of using Arabic as the official language of correspondence and Arabic scholars as civil servants was now seen as serving to promote Islam, which was now seen as a threat to French control of the colonies.

The sudden change in French colonial policy limited the social mobility of Islamic scholars who had aspired to wealth and status as members of an elite class of intellectuals. Teachers, scholars, and graduates of Quranic schools found themselves forced into other occupations because their schools could no longer provide the education desired by the French. Muslim children would now have to attend school twice—once to satisfy Islam and then again to acquire the skills that would lead to wealth and knowledge in colonial society.

The French also levied taxes to pay for the colony's administration, and by doing so, they forcefully intruded into the lives of ordinary people. More importantly, they disrupted the local economic structure because the new taxes had to be paid in currency rather than in goods. Now Africans needed to earn hard currency, and this led to the dissolution of local ties and to the establishment of broader, regional connections. One can argue that by forcing normally sedentary farmers into a regional labor pool, the French added to the fluidity of an already fluid region because they could not encase vast populations behind European artificially drawn borders. Nevertheless, pursuing currency for paying taxes factored more people into West Africa's already mobile populations—some in the pursuit of commerce and others of Quranic education. However, migration was generally seasonal and not permanent. The Mande never accepted the proposition that they were attached to one specific area; they did not see themselves as being detached from their Mande-speaking brethren throughout West Africa.

Guinée Française in 1897 made each male and female above the age of eight pay a personal tax of two francs. This event may remind some of us the local tax blacks had to pay to walk downtown in some southern towns in the United States. By 1900 the personal tax provided most of France's budgetary resources, while in 1928 it represented 71 percent of the government's receipts.⁹¹ By the first decade of the twentieth century, the tax burden on the subjects of the AOF had tripled.⁹² One result was that Africans were encouraged to earn taxes in currency by diverting arable land to the production of cash crops valued by European markets. Africans earned currency as laborers on plantations producing cash crops or by portering and trafficking in groundnuts, the preferred cash crop.

To protect French interests in Conakry, Governor Ballay tried to force the transport of commercial resources through Port Etienne. On 14 April 1905, Ballay decreed a surtax on merchandise lacking the tax stamps showing its passage through Conakry. Ballay hoped to divert imports and exports to Conakry's port from established ports in Sierra Leone and Liberia.⁹³ His measure was largely ineffective, however, because to control local commerce he had the impossible task of controlling movement. This decree had placed itself at odds with another French policy encouraging population migration. In 1909 only 59 percent of the total number of exports from the AOF could be certified as bound for France, while from 1910 to 1913 only 48 percent of the total imports received by the AOF can be documented as having been furnished by France.⁹⁴ The French were never able to control trade fully.

Forced labor subsidized the administration's budget. Because of the ravages of the slave trade, endemic illnesses, and war, labor became more

scarce in the region than the French had anticipated, and they had to tap into the pool of manpower that fueled local economies. However, the existing social order had incorporated a labor supply system of slaves and captives for economic support. As early as 1887, Joseph-Simon Gallieni had created *villages de liberté*, which were actually holding areas for former slaves who had been freed as a result of the demise of the slave trade. But the French used the village residents to perform labor for which they did not have adequate manpower. As the *village de liberté* lost its support in the humanitarian climate of emancipation, colonial administrators created another method of forcing labor without being overtly accused of establishing another type of slavery. All subjects of the AOF were forced into doing work for the administration, and one form of coercion was a tax called the *prestation*.⁹⁵ Adults were required to labor for 12 days, payable at one to three francs per day. They were assigned menial labor such as the construction of roads, the production of an agricultural surplus, or to the production of cash crops for commercial companies.⁹⁶

Still another form of forced labor employed by colonial administrators was the *indigénat*. The *indigénat* was established by the decree of 30 September 1887 as a means of expediting justice at the local level by French-appointed local leaders. Since the French judicial system was not used at the canton level, infractions of local rules were assessed at 15 days in jail and a 100 franc fine.⁹⁷ There were no trials and no possibility of appeal.⁹⁸ The *indigénat* was introduced into Senegal 12 October 1888, and into Guinée Française and the French Sudan on 14 September 1907.⁹⁹

During both world wars, Kankan supported France's war effort by supplying food stuffs and troops for the *Tirailleurs Senegalais*. While some men volunteered to join France's war, many who fought were conscripts. Another duty of the *chefs de canton* was to contribute manpower and also the produce to feed its manpower.

However, forced labor promoted massive migration in the region, particularly of two types—one to accommodate French policy and another to escape it. The result was that inductees who fulfilled the requirements of nation building were carried on a tide swell through the AOF to achieve established French goals. People in Guinea eluded the forced labor and taxation by slipping silently into the currents of the trade routes and beaching themselves in Liberian or else British or Portuguese territories. For this reason the French monitored borders in order to stop them from making the crossing.¹⁰⁰ Dyula traders who sailed these currents themselves were joined by a wider range of Mande speakers from the southern Sudan, thus renewing the Mande Diaspora.

Kankan became the seat of government for the entire region of the southern Sudan from 1892–1894.¹⁰¹ It had the advantage of its connec-

tions to the Sudan and its location at the heart of the savanna trade network. So France sent merchandise to Kankan from the regional capital at Dakar, Senegal. The merchandise left from Gorée or Saint-Louis and took approximately a month and a half to reach its destination; twenty-four days were designated for portage of the merchandise from Conakry to Kankan.¹⁰² As observed earlier, by sending merchandise through the newly created Port Etienne in Conakry, the French hoped to divert the flow of trade away from the British port at Freetown. Competition for profits heated the commercial rivalry between Guinea and Sierra Leone. However, the regional Mande trade networks which had a monopoly over long distance trade (a monopoly that continues to the present day) were hardly affected.¹⁰³

At the turn of the twentieth century, Kankan was a town of 5,000 inhabitants.¹⁰⁴ D'Ollone (Capitaine) described its religious community as being devoutly Muslim and taking exception to foreigners who imposed Christianity. In his report d'Ollone notified the colonial government that Kankan should be considered strategically important because of its commercial connections, and he saw the town's centrality as a means of supplying the interior post of Bamako. D'Ollone expressed his approval of Kankan as an excellent collection point for the principal object of commerce, groundnuts; he even suggested that groundnuts should be accepted in lieu of money for paying taxes.¹⁰⁵

By 1910 principal European commercial houses had set up stores in Kankan, and its European population had doubled. While Kankan's merchants continued to dominate local and regional trade, international trade became the domain of Europeans, Lebanese, and Syrians; many of the latter were Christians escaping the Ottoman empire.¹⁰⁶ Because foreign groups often sent profits back to their respective homelands rather than reinvesting them in Kankan, the international monopoly helped suppress the growth of a Kankannais bourgeoisie, but it was kept in an embryonic state until the Europeans withdrew at independence.¹⁰⁷

The year 1911 found Kankan a mixed commune with a mayor and a municipal commission composed of notables, Europeans, and *indigènes*. It became the regional agricultural center when Guinea was further subdivided into four agricultural regions, Basse Guinée, Guinée Forestière, Moyenne Guinée, and Haute-Guinée. Later Kankan became the administrative seat for the chamber of commerce, the military, and a justice of the peace.¹⁰⁸ With its numerous, foreign-owned, commercial houses and its centralized regional government, Kankan was able to support a cosmopolitan community.

The year 1914 welcomed the railroad to Kankan; it connected Conakry by way of Kouroussa.¹⁰⁹ Although the colonial infrastructure

continually attempted to divert local commerce from existing trade routes to the port at Conakry, Kankan flourished by trading with Kouroussa, Siguiri, and Bamako by way of the Niger River and its tributary the Milo. Kankan's port on the Milo River operated during the rainy season when many different watercraft transported a wide assortment of home grown and foreign goods to Bamako. A good number of the Maninka-mory in Kankan earned a living by selling produce from their truck farms, but while people in town were still engaged in farming, fishing, and hunting, Kankan's principal occupation became commerce.¹¹⁰ On the eve of the First World War there were six important export companies dealing directly with Europe, two other important companies which did not export directly, and 23 shops representing still other companies. Of the 31 shops, 21 were French-owned, 2 were English-owned, and 8 were Syrian-owned.¹¹¹ By 1916 Kankan was reported to have 8,000 inhabitants, an additional 23,000 in its outskirts, and a total of 95,000 for the Kankan *Cercle*.

P. Humblot describes the Islamic tradition of Kankan and the Baté. He observed that Kankan's Muslims were neither fanatical nor mystical but had character determined by religious values.¹¹² A sizeable number of Muslims throughout Guinée Française continued to reject French schooling, preferring Quranic schools instead. But for their families to get ahead, they were ultimately forced to send their children to a French one.¹¹³ Muslims also objected to the encroachment of French language and culture on the life of their children, and some even risked prison in their defiance of French cultural imperialism. Kankan's Muslims were reasonable, however. Simultaneously realizing the benefits as well as the detriments of colonial education, Islamic scholars found a middle way and thus incorporated the best of the French and Quranic schools in creating the *médersa*. At first the *médersa* (also known as the Franco-Arab school) was no better received by the Islamic community than the colonial schools had been. Gradually, however, the numbers of students matriculating in Franco-Arab schools increased. Students of the *médersa* learned to speak, read, and write in French in a curriculum similar to the one of French schools. They learned the Arabic language independently of the Quran, and they also memorized Arabic in its traditional manner as a part of Quranic study. This younger Islamic generation controlled secular knowledge through the French language and religious knowledge through the Arabic language.

Reminiscing, Amara Kanté's family observes that his own school at Soumankoyin-Kölönin had followed in the original Quranic school format because during his time there had been no *médersas*.¹¹⁴ One of Amara's sons believed that there had been as many as 600 students at his father's

school at one time.¹¹⁵ The large number enrolled attests to the fine, scholarly reputation Amara Kanté had acquired during his Islamic training in the schools of the Baté. According to one of his daughters, the news of the quality of Amara's first graduates and his ability to simplify instruction had won him praise throughout the region.¹¹⁶ Family informants add that students had flocked to Soumankoyin-Kölönin to learn Arabic from him in three years instead of the customary seven year period.¹¹⁷ Locally, his students came from the 12 villages of the Baté and also from more distant communities such as Wassolon.^{118,119} A great number of students who were sent by their fathers to the prestigious school also arrived from communities that dotted the long-distance trade routes that later became the countries of Mali, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana.¹²⁰ Speaking about his father's school, Souleymane Kanté is reported to have said that all Mande languages were spoken in his home by students in his father's school, including those from Mali and Côte d'Ivoire.¹²¹

The sociopolitical context, 1922–1946

If during the first decade of the twentieth century West Africa had witnessed the consolidation of European rule, the second two decades testified to the evolution of an imposed but viable colonial administration. The colonial structure within the AOF remained unchanged until massive reforms were later instituted in the 1940s and 1950s.¹²² While the administration of French West Africa appeared to be stable, colonial administrators believed that their control was tenuous and the political fabric could be rent at any time.¹²³

In 1936 the *cercle* of Kankan was composed of 18 cantons and 283 villages, in which resided 215 Europeans, 20,000 Pular speakers, and 126,696 Maninka speakers. The *commune mixte* of Kankan contained 129 Europeans, 86 Lebanese, and 9,141 indigenous people—mostly Maninka speakers—and a company of 675 *Tirailleurs Senegalais* was stationed close by at Camp Archinard.¹²⁴ The city was now divided into five *quartiers*, and its mayor was its chief administrator. There had been 11 mayors of Kankan by 1936, and the constant turnover was not conducive to efficient government. One important event that year was that Marabout Sékou Mamdou Chérif returned to Kankan after having been expelled from Sierra Leone, and upon arrival, he was imprisoned by the Tribunal in Conakry; he had taught Quranic school there before moving to Siguiri. Reports of the period indicate that the Islamic community had finally been pacified. During the course of the year, there had been no rebellions, no dissident movements, and no anti-French propaganda in Kankan.¹²⁵

The majority of Kankan's population still spoke Maninka, and property owners and merchants were mostly Maninka. Muslims dominated Kankan and towns of the Baté, but most of the Mande-speaking population of the *Cercle* de Kankan was non-Muslim. The Economic Commission 1936–1937 reported that in 1936 there were 7,491 travelers and 78,000 tons of produce departing Kankan by rail. As a result, the inspector recommended that a bridge be constructed over the Milo River in order to facilitate the burgeoning regional trade; forced labor would build the bridge. Other figures from this report show that the *Cercle* de Kankan had 4 airports with its principal landing strip being built by forced labor; three large, private enterprises in the *cercle* employed 400 workers; the public sector used 250 to 400 workers; the city and the school for agriculture employed 30 to 50; and the *Société des Plantations de la Guinée Française*, the sisal plantation on the road to Kissidougou, was required to have recruitment contracts for its 41 workers.^{126,127}

Commerce thrived. Although the *Cercle* de Kankan had its wide variety of food and cash crops, herd animals in the area were limited, making the quantity of beef insufficient for sale in the marketplace. The shortfall in beef had occurred because of the bovine disease epidemics which occurred from 1918 to 1930.¹²⁸ This shortfall limited the amount of protein available in the local diet. On the social level, the scarcity of cattle increased the cost of the bride price. Under these conditions, young men had to work longer to marry and often had to leave their community to earn enough money to purchase the number of cattle necessary for the bride price. The costs were high because agriculture and herding were important mainstays of the local inhabitants.¹²⁹

At the time of Souleymane Kanté's birth in 1922, Kankan was the second most important city in Guinea after the capital at Conakry. Souleymane Kanté was one of seven children (five boys and two girls), and the first son to be born in Soumankoyin-Kölönin located eight miles from Kankan.^{130,131} His mother, Djaka Keita, was one of Amara's seven wives.¹³² As a child, Souleymane spent time with his mother's family in Balandou where his mother had been raised in the Diallo family.¹³³ According to one of Kanté's brothers, Souleymane stood out among his siblings as being intellectually superior. His family felt that he had been endowed by God with an extraordinary intelligence.¹³⁴ All of the children had attended Amara's school. His brother also recounted that a very young Souleymane would accompany his father when he was teaching, then later would return home alone while other students were still doing their lessons. Even at a young age Kanté was able to correct others' mistakes: "My father did not say it like that; he said it like this," he would say.¹³⁵

Former students of Amara's school speculated that at the time of Amara's death in 1941, more than 300 students had been attending the school at Soumankoyin-Kölönin. Souleymane and his brother tried to keep the school alive after their father had died, but they were unsuccessful. Amara's school declined because the school's reputation was intrinsically tied to the reputation of the father, its premier scholar, no matter how excellent the reputation of his secondary teachers.¹³⁶

While his elder brothers remained at Soumankoyin-Kölönin to manage family properties there, the family recalled that Souleymane had decided to leave and to seek his fortune in Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire, which had the solid reputation of being a cosmopolitan area where a man could make his fortune. According to Kante's sisters, experiencing economic problems himself, Souleymane left for Côte d'Ivoire accompanied by three students, Amara Kakoro of Djankan and Demba and Bily Nankouman Keita, both from Koumana.¹³⁷ Souleymane's youngest brother recounted that the period of his departure coincided with an explosion of economic ambition throughout the world which caused students to abandon their studies to search for money.¹³⁸ He further related that the forced march of the Islamic community from its esoteric world into the material world probably brought about the demise of the large Quranic schools in the region.¹³⁹ His brother also remembered that Souleymane had believed that study was important, but he also thought that it was equally important to go out and to see the world.¹⁴⁰ Souleymane Kanté is reported to have remained a teacher in Côte d'Ivoire, but he also became a merchant of Arabic books.

Conclusion

Souleymane Kanté grew up in the region of the Baté that was nurtured by its rich cultural past. His character was built upon Islamic family values, molded by the religious commitment of an entire community to Islam, but his secular ideas were determined by the decrees of a colonial empire. His creativity would have a profound influence upon the Mande world when his quest led him to seek a renewal of the Mande spirit.

Souleymane emulated his father's quest to pursue intellectual perfection, but already well-schooled in the Quran, Souleymane instead followed his own direction. He learned several languages and read a wide range of religious and secular texts. Kanté also collected and recorded the practices and the medicines of the Mande healers. His research has preserved in written form an enormous amount of Mande culture.

Amara had also pioneered a new method of teaching. Souleymane had witnessed his father's efforts to develop a teaching methodology which reduced to two-thirds the time his students needed to acquire knowledge

of the Arabic language. Like his father, Souleymane became tenacious and creative. He spent seven years developing the N'ko alphabet which is now used for writing in the Mande languages, thus allowing common people the ability to read the Quran and other books in Mande for the first time.

Souleymane Kanté believed that the most important form of knowledge was Islam. While he himself had controlled that knowledge by mastering Arabic, few of his brethren had achieved Arabic literacy at his level of competence. Having invented N'ko, he then translated the Quran, and made it possible for others to seek religious knowledge directly using their own maternal language.

It was also at his father's school that Kanté learned about the diversity of Mande culture, and there also witnessed the diversity. As a result, when Souleymane Kanté created his alphabet, he made sure it could be used by all Mande speakers. His purpose, it seems, was to promote communication between first and second language users and to create a Mande written record for those who used Mande as a *lingua franca*.

Becoming an educated cosmopolitan individual in Côte d'Ivoire, Kanté observed the importance of modern technology and the importance of administering one's political environment. Well aware of colonial policy that used French to control politics and economics, Souleymane translated into N'ko prized modern works in the sciences, mathematics, and medicine. In addition, he also provided access to valuable modern information to those who had refused to place their children into the French educational system.

Souleymane Kanté is also a product of the cumulative colonial experiences of his family. His father and many other Quranic school teachers had practiced slavery prior to the twentieth century. After slavery ended, the Quranic school teachers took time from instruction to allow their students to work in the fields in order to produce needed food supplies. Depending upon the satisfaction and the benefice of their graduates' parents, Quranic scholars had never charged for their services, but money eventually became a necessary part of the transactions because Quranic students lived with their teachers, and the French colonial administration levied a tax on each household member whose age was above eight years. This tax was detrimental to Quranic schools.

The colonial administration's policies for controlling labor, extracting natural resources, and restricting indigenous people's participation in the economic and political process drew Souleymane away from the isolation of the religious and scholarly world and into the hubbub of the material, secular world. Like Kanté, many people were forced to enter the Mande diaspora in order to accommodate France's constant demand for tax money and labor.

Informants reveal that Souleymane Kanté felt the need to observe and understand the wider world, and he came to know and to reject the pseudo-scientific racism created by the theories of the Frenchman Count Gobineau and the *déterminisme* that denied Africans culture or intelligence. Kanté instead sought to create an alphabet that would adequately transcribe all the Mande languages; his actions became a rejection of France's condescending, modernizing, and civilizing mission.

On the whole, some Africans responded to France's increased control and to its monetary and labor demands by relocating themselves to an area of minimal contact with Europeans. Others who were unable to escape tried to manipulate the system to serve their own cultural, economic, or political purposes; their ultimate weapon in preserving the African spirit and in preventing its dissolution was cultural identity.¹⁴¹ Eventually Kanté returned to the Baté, the cradle of Mande culture, from Côte d'Ivoire in order to lead Mande speakers in an intellectual revolution that would usher in a period of Mande enlightenment. His long lasting contribution was the establishment of a literacy campaign that reasserted Mande control over knowledge by using their maternal language through a new writing system called N'ko.

Notes

¹ George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language."

² The sources for this local history include oral interviews with the Kanté family, who provided details of their family's history. They also include the writings of a number of historians from Kankan, some of them local research students writing to fulfill university graduation requirements. The student writes a senior thesis called a *Mémoire* which is a local, regional, or national history monograph based upon primary sources including archival documents, first hand accounts by European explorers and colonizers, and interviews with local informants.

³ Emile Leynaud and Youssouf Cissé, *Paysans Malinké du Haut Niger (Tradition et Développement rural en Afrique Soudanaise)*, (Bamako, Mali: Edition Imprimerie Populaire du mai, 1987), p. 37.

⁴ P. Humblot, "Kankan" Métropole de la Haute-Guinée," *L'Afrique Française: Renseignements Coloniaux et Documents*, No. 6, juin 1921, p. 163.

⁵ Kefing Condé, Professor of History at the Gamal Abdel Nasser University in Conakry; Louis Brenner writes about changes in Muslim identity in the West African Soudan. Louis Brenner, "Constructing Muslim Identities in Mali," in *Muslim Identity and Social Change in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. Louis Brenner, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 63.

⁶ The Tijaniyya Sufi Order was founded by Al Tijani from Morocco in the eighteenth century.

⁷ Kefing Condé identifies the origin of the Qadiriyya as eleventh century Iraq and the origin of Tijaniyya as 1781 in Algeria. Humblot (p. 138) described the Muslims of Kankan as neither mystics nor fanatics [largely describing the Qadiriyya sect] and that the Tijaniyya sect had been introduced into Kankan by Alfa Mohammodou.

⁸ The Qadiriyya Sufi Order was founded by Al Qadir from Algeria In the nineteenth century.

⁹ Brenner, "Muslim Identities," p. 62.

¹⁰ Brenner, p. 64.

¹¹ Louis Brenner, *West African Sufi the Religious Heritage & Spiritual Search of Cerno Bokar Saalif Taal*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), p. 21.

¹² Yves Person, "Samori and Resistance to the French," in *Protest and Power in Black Africa*, Robert I Rotberg and Ali A. Ma, eds., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 82.

¹³ Boundiala Condé, "L'Université Traditionnelle Coranique de Kankan des Origines à l'Implantation Coloniale," Memoire, Université Julius Nyerere, Kankan, p. 12.

¹⁴ Bolivard Koikoi Grovogui, "Place de la Baraka dans la Morale du Manding—centre d'Application: Kankan," Memoire, Université Julius Nyerere, Kankan, 1991, p. 18; Humblot, p. 140.

¹⁵ Mody Oury Barry, "Analyse Sociologique de l'Interpenetration de la Tradition et du Modernisme dans les Activities Socio-culturelles en Guinée—Centre d'application: Prefecture de Kankan," Memoire, Julius Nyerere Université, Kankan, 1991, pp. 6–9.

¹⁶ Brenner, *Sufi*, p. 37.

¹⁷ Claude Rivière, "Bilan de l'Islamisation en Guinée," *Afrique Documents*, No. 105–106, Cinquième et Sixième Cahier, 1969, pp. 338–339.

¹⁸ Jean Suret-Canale, "L'Economie de traite en Afrique Noire sous domination Françaises (1900–1914)," *Recherches Africaines: Etudes Guinéennes*, No. 2, avril–juin, 1960, p. 6. French historian Jean Suret-Canale is the premier western historian on the history of Guinea.

¹⁹ Claude Rivière, "Inégalités dans l'Organisation Sociale Malinké," in *Cultures et Développement: Revue Internationale de Sciences du Développement*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1973, p. 285.

²⁰ Rivière, p. 288.

²¹ Boundiala Condé, p. 11.

²² Condé pp. 11–12.

²³ Yves Person, "Esclavage et Captivité dans la Société Malenké," in *Bulletin de Liaison des Professeurs d'Histoire et de Géographie d'Afrique et de Madagascar*, pp. 37–38.

²⁴ Grovogui, p. 17.

²⁵ Informants remembered that the Tijaniyya sect came to Kankan in the early nineteenth century when an intermediary of Oumar Taal from Dinguiraye brought the new form of Islam to the chief of the Dyiunkon family. Interview 11, March 15, 1993, in Kankan.

²⁶ Boundiala Condé, pp. 19–20.

²⁷ Condé, pp. 21–22.

²⁸ Condé, p. 22.

²⁹ Condé, pp. 27–28.

³⁰ Réné Caillié, *Travels through Central Africa to Timbuctoo and across the Great Desert to Morocco performed in the years 1824–1828*, Volume I, (Frank Cass & Co., Ltd., 1968), pp. 280–281.

³¹ Caillié (p. 281) observed that the inhabitants of Kankan were all Muslims who disliked pagans and infidels.

³² Caillié, p. 281.

³³ Caillié, p. 281.

³⁴ Caillié, p. 257.

³⁵ Caillié, p. 257.

³⁶ Person, "Samori and Resistance," p. 87.

³⁷ Yves Person, "Samori and Islam," in *Studies in West African Islamic History: The Cultivators of Islam*, Volume 1, John Ralph Willis, ed., (London: Frank Cass, 1979), pp. 262–263.

³⁸ Mervyn Hiskett, *The Development of Islam in West Africa*, (New York: Longman, 1984), p. 242.

³⁹ Kankan's refusal to assist Samori's attack on fellow Muslims brought a besieged Kankan to its knees in 1881. Rather than be subjected to the tyranny of Samori, the ruling Kaba family was forced to abandon its home seeking shelter and support in the Fouta Djallon with the family of Oumar Taal. With the absence of the true founders, Samori appointed Batrouba Laye Chérif from his own Muslim supporters to rule Kankan. Ten years later when Karamö Daye Kaba brought relief from suppression in the form of French troops, Batrouba Laye Chérif burned Kankan, an act which disgraced the Chérif family until the rise of the renown religious cleric Fanta Madi Chérif in 1922. The French reinstated the Kabas as the rulers of Kankan, because they were the descendants of the original founders. With promises of a brighter future, the citizens of Kankan returned to rebuild their city. Claude Rivière, "Islam," pp. 332–333. Humbot (pp. 153 and 138, respectively) explained that when colonel Archinard entered Kankan on April 7, 1891, that the village was burned and abandoned. Furthermore, he identified Daye Kaba, who had delivered Kankan to the French, as Kankan's interim leader until Mori Kaba was freed from captivity and reinstated to that position.

- ⁴⁰ Claude Rivière identifies this as the father of Fanta Madi Chérif, the famous religious leader of Kankan, "Islamisation," p. 333.
- ⁴¹ Person, "Samori and Islam," pp. 270–271.
- ⁴² Person, "Samori and Resistance," pp. 90–91.
- ⁴³ Group interview 27, April 26, 1993, in Soumankoyin-Kölönin with a member of Souleymane Kanté's paternal family.
- ⁴⁴ Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan with a member of Souleymane Kanté's extended family.
- ⁴⁵ Interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan with a member of Souleymane Kanté's paternal family.
- ⁴⁶ Interview 26, April 26, 1993, in Soumankoyin-Kölönin with a member of Souleymane Kanté's paternal family.
- ⁴⁷ Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan with a member of Souleymane Kanté's extended family.
- ⁴⁸ Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan with a member of Souleymane Kanté's extended family.
- ⁴⁹ Group interview 17, April 5, 1993, in Balandou with members of the maternal side of Souleymane Kanté's family.
- ⁵⁰ In group interview 27, April 26, 1993, in Soumankoyin-Kölönin, one informant was the 120 year old surviving wife of Amara Kanté.
- ⁵¹ This methodology is similar to that of European education where students sought out specific knowledge by studying with scholars at particular universities.
- ⁵² Hiskett, p. 57.
- ⁵³ Interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan.
- ⁵⁴ Interview 26, April 26, 1993, in Soumankoyin-Kölönin.
- ⁵⁵ Group interview 27, April 26, 1993, in Soumankoyin-Kölönin.
- ⁵⁶ Interview 26, April 26, 1993, in Soumankoyin-Kölönin.
- ⁵⁷ Group interview 18, April 5, 1993, in Balandou.
- ⁵⁸ Jean Suret-Canale, *La République de Guinée*, (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1970), p. 82.
- ⁵⁹ Suret-Canale, *La Guinée*, p. 84.
- ⁶⁰ Djibril Tamsir Niane, *Républic de Guinée: Histoire*, 5e et 6e années primaires, (Paris: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1986), p. 83.
- ⁶¹ Suret-Canale, *La Guinée*, p. 84.
- ⁶² Niane, *Histoire*, p. 83.
- ⁶³ Suret-Canale, *La Guinée*, p. 84.
- ⁶⁴ Suret-Canale, *La Guinée*, p. 84.
- ⁶⁵ C. Harrison, T.B. Ingawa, and S.M. Martin tell us that at the local level boundaries changed frequently because of the administration's desire to shift the "ethnic balance" within the colonies. "The Establishment of

Colonial Rule in West Africa, c. 1900–1914,” in *History of West Africa*, Volume Two, edited by J.F.A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder, (London: Longman, 1987), p. 488.

⁶⁶ Humblot (pp. 139–140) expounded upon the ‘gens de service,’ their role in the colonial hierarchy.

⁶⁷ Jean Suret-Canale, “La Fine de la Cheffrie en Guinée,” *Journal of African History*, Vol. 7., No. 3, 1966, p. 461.

⁶⁸ Harrison, Ingawa, and Martin, p. 488.

⁶⁹ Niane, photo-copy of Décret from the Archives National de Côte d’Ivoire, *Histoire*, p. 84.

⁷⁰ Brenner, *Sufi*, p. 35.

⁷¹ Brenner, p. 34.

⁷² Alpha Sékou Fantamady Condé, “Monographie Historique de Sigiri de l’Implantation Coloniale à l’Indepdendance,” Memoire, Université Julius Nyerere, Kankan, p. 42.

⁷³ Alpha Sékou Fantamady Condé, p. 40.

⁷⁴ Lt. Pinchon, Commandant de Cercle, Ministre des Colonies Services géographiques et des missions, records the world he witnessed while in the service of the Ministry of the Colonies in *Revue Coloniale*, (Paris: Imprimerie St. Paul, 1901), p. 32.

⁷⁵ *Tableau Chronologiques des Commandants de Cercle de Kankan, sous la colonisation de 1891 à 1958*, and Lt. Pinchon, p. 143.

⁷⁶ Suret-Canale, “Cheffrie,” p. 462.

⁷⁷ Babacar Fall, *Le Travail Forcé en Afrique Occidentale Française (1900–1945)*, (Paris: Karthala, 1993), p. 64.

⁷⁸ Rivière, “Organisation,” p. 283.

⁷⁹ Harrison, Ingawa, and Martin, p. 501.

⁸⁰ Suret-Canale, *La Guinée*, p. 91.

⁸¹ Rivière, “Organisation,” p. 289.

⁸² Suret-Canale, *La Guinée*, p. 92.

⁸³ Brenner, *Sufi*, pp. 35–37.

⁸⁴ Peggy R. Sabatier, “‘Elite’ Education in French West Africa: The Era of Limits, 1903–1945,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1978, p. 247.

⁸⁵ Sabatier, p. 247.

⁸⁶ Sabatier, p. 249.

⁸⁷ Sabatier, p. 249–250.

⁸⁸ Humblot (p. 154) published his description of the conditions he witnessed on his tour of Kankan and the Colony of Guinea.

⁸⁹ Brenner, *Sufi*, p. 37.

⁹⁰ Hiskett, p. 213.

- ⁹¹ Claude Rivière, "Les Bénéficiaires du Commerce dans la Guinée," *Bulletin de l'I.F.A.N.* T.XXXIII, séries B, No. 2, 1971, p. 270.
- ⁹² Harrison, Ingawa, and Martin, p. 506.
- ⁹³ Suret-Canale, "l'Economie de traite," p. 8.
- ⁹⁴ Suret-Canale "l'Economie de traite," p. 8.
- ⁹⁵ Only a small number of Africans in the AOF such as those in the four Communes in Senegal were considered to be citizens. The remaining population were called subjects. Forced labor requirements were not imposed on citizens.
- ⁹⁶ Michael Crowder, *West Africa Under Colonial Rule*, (London, Anchor Press, Ltd., 1968), pp. 184–185.
- ⁹⁷ Babacar Fall, pp. 47–48.
- ⁹⁸ Harrison, Ingawa, and Martin, p. 502.
- ⁹⁹ Babacar Fall, p. 48.
- ¹⁰⁰ Crowder, p. 186, 336–338.
- ¹⁰¹ Humblot, p. 153.
- ¹⁰² Humblot, p. 153.
- ¹⁰³ Suret-Canale, *La Guinée*, p. 94.
- ¹⁰⁴ Capitaine D'Ollone, *Mission Hostains-D'Ollone 1898–1900: de la Côte d'Ivoire au Soudan et à la Guinée*, (Paris: Librairie Hachette et Cie, 1901), pp.232–233. Capitaine D'Ollone's report bears witness to conditions in Kankan at the turn of the century.
- ¹⁰⁵ Capitaine D'Ollone, pp. 232–233.
- ¹⁰⁶ Suret-Canale, "Economie de traite," p. 9.
- ¹⁰⁷ Odile Goerg, "La Guinée," *L'Afrique Occidentale au Temps des Français: Colonisateurs et Colonisés (c. 1860–1960)*, Catherine Coquery-vidrovitch ed. (Paris, Editions la Découverte, 1993), p. 361.
- ¹⁰⁸ Humblot, p. 153.
- ¹⁰⁹ Humblot, p. 129.
- ¹¹⁰ Humblot, pp. 154–156.
- ¹¹¹ Humblot, p. 157.
- ¹¹² Humblot, p. 138.
- ¹¹³ Brenner, *Sufi*, p. 36.
- ¹¹⁴ Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan.
- ¹¹⁵ Interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan.
- ¹¹⁶ Group interview 52, June 22, 1993, in Djankana.
- ¹¹⁷ Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan.
- ¹¹⁸ Interview 26, April 26, 1993, in Soumankoyin-Kölönin.
- ¹¹⁹ Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan.
- ¹²⁰ Interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan.
- ¹²¹ Interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan.
- ¹²² Harrison, Ingawa, and Martin, p. 489.

¹²³ J.F.A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder, "West Africa 1919–1939: The Colonial situation," in *History of West Africa*, Volume Two, edited by J.F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder, (London: Longman, 1987), p. 579.

¹²⁴ M.Huet, Inspecteur General 2ème Classe de Colonies, Chef de Mission, "Service Situation Economique de Cercle de Kankan," Mission 1936–1937 en Afrique Occidental, No. 43, 1937, pp. 4–5.

¹²⁵ M.Huet, Inspecteur General 2ème Classe de Colonies, Chef de Mission, "Service Municipaux de la Commune Mixte de Kankan," Mission 1936–1937 en Afrique Occidental, No. 44, 1937, p. 1–3, 10.

¹²⁶ Huet, "Situation Economique," pp. 4, 30–31.

¹²⁷ Huet, "Situation Economique," p. 35.

¹²⁸ Huet, "Situation Economique," pp. 6–7.

¹²⁹ Mme. Savineau, "La Guinée Orientale," Rapport No. 13, April 1938, p. 17.

¹³⁰ Group interview 52, June 22, 1993, in Djankana.

¹³¹ Group interview 27, April 26, 1993, in Soumankoyin-Kölönin.

¹³² Group interview 52, June 22, 1993, in Djankana.

¹³³ There has been much confusion over the parentage of Souleymane Kanté's mother. The mother of Djaka Keita married into the Diallo family, bringing Djaka with her. There is no explanation of the circumstances surrounding this event.

¹³⁴ Interview 27, April 26, 1993, in Soumankoyin-Kölönin.

¹³⁵ Interview 27, April 26, 1993, in Soumankoyin-Kölönin.

¹³⁶ Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan.

¹³⁷ Interview 52, June 22, 1993, in Djankana.

¹³⁸ Interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan.

¹³⁹ Interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁴⁰ Interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁴¹ Ajayi and Crowder, p. 603–604.

Chapter 4

A Cultural Revolution through N'ko Literacy — The Period of Mande Enlightenment

Whether myth or history, according to members of the N'ko literate community, Souleymane Kanté invented N'ko as the result of a challenge offered by the Lebanese journalist Kamal Marwa in his 1944 publication, *Nahnu fi Afrikiya* (*We are in Africa*).¹ After conducting research on African culture in British and French colonies, Kamal Marwa had concluded that Africans were inferior because they had no written form of communication.² His position reflected the prevailing racism of colonial Europeans. African voices [languages], he alleged, were like those of the birds, impossible to transcribe. While the journalist does acknowledge that the Vai had created a syllabary, he discounted its cultural relevancy because he deemed it incomplete.³ In the Mande oral tales which recount the vicissitudes of N'ko's creator, Kanté's efforts to prove Marwa wrong became a journey of enlightenment which ended in the creation of a completely new writing system which can accommodate the tonality of Mande languages, and thus one can say that in that year began a period of Mande enlightenment.

Informants who knew him say that throughout life, he learned several languages including Arabic, French, and English, and he read copiously works from the past as well as modern day science and technology. One could very well say about him that the breadth and scope of his learning would have made him a Renaissance scholar had he lived in Europe during the fifteenth century. However, because Kanté's greatest contribution to Mande culture was to set its identity in words all the Mande could read, his behavior offers greater affinity with several writers of the Enlightenment period. In its intent Kanté's *History of the Mandingue for Four Thousand Years* marks a new departure in Mande historiography because Kanté incorporates oral history into the written record of the complete history of the speakers of Mande languages, as did Voltaire who marks a new departure for French historiography with his *The Age of Louis XIV* (1751) in which he is the first to describe the history of a European nation state in its entirety.⁴ Kanté also compiles an encyclopedia, as did Diderot, and like Samuel Johnson and Noah Webster, Kanté compiles a dictionary. One can conclude that Kanté, like those writers, had a highly focused public consciousness with regard to language, and like Rousseau, Kanté was an autodidact. While accepting the necessity that speakers of Mande languages learn knowledge in their maternal language, he also encouraged them to learn foreign languages. That Kanté recommends

the latter is in itself a testimony to his own spirit of toleration, for it was through foreign languages that Africans became disempowered and eventually impoverished.

Kanté's adventurous individualism in seeking truths about his culture shows his intellectual affinity with thinkers of the European Enlightenment in regard to the following issues: his reverence for the past; his belief that all things could be logically explained through the maternal language; and that, therefore, the Mande languages were worthy of being used for writing; his invention and dissemination of the N'ko alphabet; his ascertaining, fixing, and standardizing of Mande words through his dictionaries and encyclopedias; his inventory of Mande vocabulary with its variants thereby justifying dialectical meaning.

The European Enlightenment that was ushered in at the end of the scientific revolution was a reaction against traditional beliefs and prejudices. Its focus was man's ability to use reason to break away from dogmatic and superstitious beliefs and ignorance. For Enlightenment thinkers reason had the capacity to generate equality and to reform society. In France the salon provided the area where one could access knowledge and discuss enlightenment ideas, but in Guinea traditional structures like *sédés* brought people together where they could discuss new knowledge imparted by N'ko documents or N'ko teachers and students discussed modern science and technology from N'ko texts. While both periods of enlightenment sought equality of equal access to knowledge through literacy and projected a better society based on new methods of learning, Kanté's Mande era of Enlightenment was a reaction against the post-colonialism that had entrenched European negative beliefs and prejudices about indigenous African society. Kanté was confident that literacy in the maternal language would construct a new Africa-based civilization that blended European knowledge with African cultural priorities. Much like the intellectuals of the European Enlightenment, Kanté referred to this new period as enlightenment in his poem, *Le Capitaine de l'espérance au bord du vaisseau des élites sur l'océan des lumières*, whose last word *lumières* is emblematic for enlightenment; the tenor of the line offers to Africans a period when they could assert control over their own destinies as they shifted from colonialism to independence and, therefore, forged their own future through knowledge.

Kanté envisioned this new era of equal access to knowledge as one which would dispel darkness and ignorance through literacy much as did the Enlightenment writers who were convinced that they were emerging from centuries of darkness and ignorance into an age of enlightened reason. While the Europeans had faith in power of human reason, Kanté had faith in the African's ability to use reason when given equal access to

knowledge through their own language. The concept that knowledge comes from experience and observation which must be catalogued is central to both. In both cases the emphasis was on a type of scientific inquiry that could be empirically understood. However, for the Africans Kanté believed that emphasis should be placed in acquiring enough education and experience to be able to achieve independent governance.

N'ko's creation

From conversations with people who knew Kanté well, one can reconstruct, as best as one can, the weighty issues Kanté discussed with his family and peers which include the reasons for the alphabet's invention, the explanations of its necessity, and the texts chosen for translation into N'ko.

Kanté's family and several of Amara Kanté's students say that Souleymane left Soumankoyin-Kölönin in 1942 at the age of 19, accompanied by 3 of his father's students.⁵ Amara Kante's school had started to decline not only because of his death but also as a result of French colonial policy. Students from the well known families began to leave. In Maninka society, rights of inheritance of the eldest brother often allow younger brothers the freedom to pursue opportunities far distant from the family home.⁶ Family and friends remember that Kanté left in search of adventure, fortune, and life-expanding experiences to be found in the context of a wider cosmopolitan world.⁷ His destination was the colony of Côte d'Ivoire, which was a focal point of commercial activity in French West Africa.⁸ Informants add that people went there because they believed Ivoirians themselves were not accomplished merchants.⁹ They also believed that those who spent time in Côte d'Ivoire would enjoy the elevated status of an *evolué*. The class of *evolués* is a small but important group of Africans devoted to education and acculturation through which they hope to achieve citizenship and full political rights.¹⁰

Kanté's first adventure in Côte d'Ivoire occurred in Bouaké where he stayed with family members.¹¹ They recall that he bought Kamal Marwa's now infamous publication at a market stall in 1944.¹² Shocked by what he had read and believing that the article gravely insulted Africans, Kanté sought to discuss his grievances with the author, but he learned that Marwa had already returned to Lebanon.^{13,14} Left to silent reflection rather than the argument he had sought about his own Mande language, Maninka, Kanté embarked on the long and arduous process of creating an alphabet which would do justice to the language of the speakers of Mande languages.

Although Souleymane Kanté had been educated in Quranic school and could read and write Arabic fluently, he had not studied French, the language of colonization. According to one of Kante's traveling companions, a young man who had been schooled in French offered

to teach Kanté the language at the Sikasso concession in Bouaké. Informants reminisced that then Kanté bought one book, and for over a month he concentrated all his efforts on learning the French language.¹⁵ Shortly thereafter, Kanté pressed on to the capital city, at the time Bingerville. He had left home to see the world and would not be denied. Family members who saw him there reported that in Bingerville Kanté set himself up as a Quranic scholar and as a merchant of Arabic books.¹⁶ It is reported that there Kanté pursued a written form for spoken Maninka, trying first Arabic script and then the Roman alphabet.

Informants add that Kanté devoted the years 1945 to 1947 to trying to write Maninka in Arabic script.¹⁷ The 28 letters of Arabic, however, could not accommodate the tonality of Mande languages, and the reading of Mande languages in Arabic script was confusing because of the difficulty in distinguishing clearly the differences between certain words. Syllables such as *gba* or *gbe*, *gbo* or *gbö*, *tchö* or *tchu* in Maninka, for example, were confusing in their Arabic representation.¹⁸ Maninka expressions such as “*muso ködö lu bada na*” [the old women have come] and “*muso ködö lu bada na*” [the brothers of the women have come] or “*N'ka i yen yen*.” [I saw you there] and “*N'ka i yen yen*.” [I do not wish to see you there] were indistinguishable when written in Arabic script, and part of the difficulty was the absence of accents in Arabic.^{19,20}

One family member reported that Kanté traveled to Ghana and Senegal in 1947 where he bought and sold kola and purchased other merchandise for resale in the region.²¹ While in Ghana, he supposedly witnessed Ghanaians writing their own languages in the Roman alphabet, and he perused a Bible that had been transcribed into the language of the Ashanti utilizing the Roman alphabet.²² He even learned some English there. Beginning in November 1947, Kanté attempted to use the graphemes of the Latin language as the medium for writing Maninka. While the graphemes accommodated the use of accents, there were still too many Maninka words that were difficult to discern, and the differences between certain sounds in the Maninka language could not be conveyed when written in the Roman alphabet.^{23,24} The confusion can be best illustrated by viewing the membership cards issued after the creation of the political party Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA) in 1946 in Bamako. It is evident that names written on the membership cards in the Roman alphabet do not readily correspond to the spoken names. Informants offered examples. When an RDA representative distributing the cards called out the written, proper name *Kitagbee*, a lady whose spoken name was actually *Kitagbè* did not recognize the one on the card as her own. Another illustration is the story of two men, *Moribaa* and *Moriba*, who lived in Souleymane's compound in Bingerville. When the tax

collector came to the compound to collect the former one's taxes, the hodgepodge sounds by the written form of *Moriba*'s name led the officer to another occupant of the compound, whose name was *Moriba* and who was asked to pay his taxes for a second time.²⁵

After considerable trial and error, Souleymane Kanté had concluded that it was impossible to write African languages accurately utilizing borrowed graphemes. A Mande proverb offers that "If one takes off the roof of a villager's house to cover the house of another one and it does not fit, then one must build a roof that will fit."²⁶ Since Kanté could neither use Arabic script nor the Roman alphabet, then he would build his own roof. Once he deduced that all languages have characteristics that regulate the transcription of the spoken word, N'ko had its birth. Mande languages, however, offer a distinct set of tonalities that make them different European languages.²⁷ Thus Kanté embarked upon an entirely new approach, the creation of a writing system that reflects the tonality of language.

Friends and supporters relate that Kanté began with a large number of signs and used the process of elimination to select an alphabet with 27 letters.²⁸ Next he resolved the phonological problems created by homonyms such as *muru*, *muuru*, *muruu* and *fada*, *faadaa*, *faada*, *fadaa*.²⁹ Informants say that after developing the graphemes he called together children and adult illiterates and asked them to draw a line in the dirt; seven out of the 10 drew the line from right to left.³⁰ Thus, in his effort to make the alphabet easy to learn and easy to use, Kanté chose a right to left orientation for writing N'ko. Finally, he decided, the N'ko alphabet was capable of representing all the sounds produced by the Mande languages.³¹ Informants say he had finished the alphabet on April 14, 1949.³² The task was not complete, however; Souleymane Kante's perfectionist nature led him to spend many more hours reworking and refining his alphabet.

Kanté's motivations

Souleymane Kanté made known several reasons for creating of the N'ko alphabet. As mentioned earlier, one immediate reason was his confrontational reaction to Kamal Marwa's words denigrating African culture. Another one, informants add, was his desire to preserve the Mande healing arts that were being lost because of the death of healers. Family and friends, however, have their own perceptions. While all are aware of Souleymane's advanced level of education, they believe strongly that Kanté's own commitment to Islamic culture was an important factor. Souleymane had been educated at his father's school; he is said to have learned several languages; he had read more than 27 translations of the Quran in French and English; and he had translated the Quran into Maninka.³³ Therefore, his family accepts that Allah gave Souleymane the power of intelligence and the obedience to understand that Allah had

directed him to be in the right place at the right time—to be in Bouaké at the time that Kamal Marwa had published his article. Strong believers claim that because Allah gave Souleymane the idea for the invention, it was God and not Souleymane who should be credited with N'ko, but they do not, however, go to the extreme of saying that God dictated the alphabet to him in a type of miraculous divine intervention. Kanté did not express these sentiments himself in his conversations, but he did make it clear that knowledge of N'ko would lead to a better understanding of Islam.³⁴

One informant reminisced that even before he had read Kamal Marwa's piece he had wanted to follow in his father's steps by providing an easier method for everyone to gain access to knowledge.³⁵ Informants generally recall that Kanté encouraged everyone to learn the alphabet because he believed that it would dispel ignorance, not just for Mande speakers but for all of Africa and all of humanity.³⁶ His emblem for N'ko, a lighted lantern, represents N'ko as a light in the darkness leading people out of ignorance.³⁷ Kanté expresses the idea that Africans needed to seek knowledge in their own maternal languages, thereby promoting an easy first-language acquisition of knowledge.³⁸ Years later a similar view would be adopted by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), and would become the seed for conflict at the Makerere Conference of 1962. Kanté has also said that education through the primary maternal language would help people to command Arabic, French and other foreign languages.³⁹ Indigenous literacy would empower Africans even if they did not go to the European schools.⁴⁰ N'ko would become a campaign not only against ignorance and illiteracy but also a nationalist movement.⁴¹ Kanté reflected that the alphabet would be for everyone, but illiterates were his first priority.⁴²

Informants also remembered Kanté as saying that he wanted all to possess the power to record their own ideas in order to keep their own memories.⁴³ Knowing N'ko would allow the community to know itself; by writing down their knowledge and personal experiences, they would also use the technology of writing to preserve knowledge for future generations.⁴⁴ As a result, Kanté encouraged people to communicate in writing with family and friends because correspondence through a third party who either wrote for them or read the reply to the correspondent deprived the people of confidentiality.⁴⁵ Kanté remarks that foreign writing systems are not appropriate to the nature of Mande languages.⁴⁶ Becoming a numbers cruncher, he speculated that the four months it took to acquire N'ko would be equivalent to two years in either Quranic or public schools.⁴⁷ The solution was that everyone should learn N'ko by spending two hours per day working in study groups. Furthermore, the regularity of informal education conducted within the security of the family compound would absorb N'ko into the cultural traditions. Learning N'ko would

take place in the evenings as had all cultural learning whenever learning was inter-generational. However, one of his concerns was that adults would have their children learn the alphabet but would refuse to learn it themselves. He is reported to have admonished them not to reject learning N'ko because they felt themselves to be too old and therefore unable to learn.⁴⁸

Another stated reason for inventing N'ko was to campaign against ignorance and illiteracy in his country of Guinea and on his continent of Africa. However, there also appeared to be a spirit of revenge in his motivation.⁴⁹ Informants often addressed how insidious were Kamal Marwa's comments about all of Africa. Souleymane had related to them that the catalyst to create the alphabet had been Marwa's challenge.⁵⁰ Quixotically, it seems, he wanted to prove to the world that Africans could create a writing system.⁵¹ One informant remembers Kanté as saying that he wanted the Europeans to believe that Africans had the ability to contribute to progress and humanity. That is to say, he wanted the world to recognize Africans' capabilities.⁵²

Addressing first and second language acquisition methodology, Kanté was reported to have discussed the advantages of learning in the maternal languages and the disadvantages of learning in a foreign language. He commented that those who study in a foreign languages lose a good portion of their culture and instead empower the language in which they are studying.⁵³ Ngugi would emphasize the same thought years later. To Kanté, learning knowledge in a foreign language promoted loss of culture by promoting cultural dependency. He was insistent that acquiring knowledge in the maternal language was a form of cultural independence.⁵⁴

Because he knew that N'ko was not for himself alone, Souleymane Kanté gave his invention a culturally significant name, *n'ko* (from the Mande *I say*). Informants gleaned the cultural significance of his choice. By spelling the words *I say* in all Mande languages, Kanté seems to be conferring universal authority to all Mande speakers with just one phrase. If speakers of African languages had no words which could be quoted, they would be left out of the text of history. An African proverb explains that "Until the lions have their historians, tales of hunting will always glorify the hunter." Being an African historian myself, I keep this proverb as a poster on my office wall where it can be seen by all. One of the problems with teaching African history is that to do justice to Africa, one has to reconstruct history in a manner similar to what I have done with this book; one must often do oral history. Kanté was eminently aware that views of Africa, which in his period were being written by the Kamal Marwas of this world, may not all favor Africans. This concern has also been brought to light by the philosopher-historian Amadou Hampâté Bâ

who is credited with saying that when an elder dies it is like a library being burned. In my view, Kanté has to be given credit for being the first African thinker to act on the issue of the preservation of the knowledge of “peasant intellectuals,” to borrow again Steven Feierman’s terminology.⁵⁵ Although Duala Buкеle did create the first Mande writing system, the Vai syllabary, his intent seems not to have been a nationalist one as was Kanté’s. It is evident that all Mande speakers do share the heroic past recounted in the epic of Sundiata as “the sons of Mali...who say ‘N’ko.’”⁵⁶

Informants also remember that Kanté stated his intention to use N’ko to preserve Mande cultural knowledge that had gradually been dissipating. The Mande healing arts, for example, were being lost in some communities as older healers died without male heirs to share their knowledge. Forbidden to divulge this knowledge to females, these healers often took their secrets to the grave, but when Kanté began collecting local medical knowledge, the healers of the Dadakö community specifically opposed Kanté’s plan of recording for posterity a leprosy cure. Believing the knowledge was intended to remain a secret, they would not share their knowledge with Kanté unless he could guarantee secrecy. Kanté then provided the healers with the names of their own treatments written in N’ko, and because the healers did not recognize the formula of their own prescriptions, they allowed him to proceed; he had met their requirement of secrecy.⁵⁷

To have religious knowledge was of primary importance to Kanté. As a young man, he had spent many dry seasons visiting with his maternal relatives in Balandou, and it was obvious to him that his maternal grandfather had forgotten parts of the Quran that he had long ago memorized in Arabic. Kanté would spend each dry season reviewing with his grandfather those forgotten portions of the Quran.⁵⁸ As a result of this experience, Kanté translated the Quran and the Hadith into the Maninka language using N’ko so that people like his grandfather could read the Quran for themselves. Most importantly, when challenged by the edict that the Quran was not translatable because it was the holy word of Allah, Kanté is reported to have argued that the Quran was not written by Allah, but by man, and, therefore, those restrictions did not apply.⁵⁹ Kanté asserted that he would never detract from Islam. Rather, he was trying to make it easier to learn and to retain Quranic knowledge by recording it in the maternal language through N’ko. He always insisted that he had invented an alphabet that would help Islam.⁶⁰

Kanté’s translations and creative works

The first work Kanté translated into N’ko was the Quran; other Islamic religious texts followed. Since Islam had arrived in Africa in the seventh century, most of its followers had used Arabic for religious practices at level two literacy, reading memorized text.⁶¹ In many cases, Muslims read

the words without really understanding their meaning. Kanté, informants say, estimated that only 2 percent of the Muslim population really understood the words they spoke. It was obvious to Kanté that if the Mande were going to understand Islam truly, translating Quranic Arabic into the Mande languages was a necessity.⁶² As a result, Souleymane Kanté began by translating the verses of the Quran using N'ko.⁶³ Its accuracy had to be verified by 10 Islamic intellectuals from Guinea, and then a report had to be filed in Saudi Arabia with a copy of a volume of the Quran written in N'ko. All members of the commission had to sign the report and affix to it their photos, thereby staking their reputations on the accuracy of the document.⁶⁴ One important reason for his translation has been mentioned earlier. Kanté believed that understanding the Quran through one's maternal language would lead to a greater understanding of Islam. His father, Amara Kanté, had become an innovator when he had reduced the time it took for his students to learn Arabic from seven to three years, and Kanté would have been familiar with his father's second language acquisition methodology. Kanté was also an avid student of languages. I believe that to him it would have been obvious to weave together language and religion in order to decide that the faster one understood Islam, the better it would be. The Quran accessible to speakers of Mande literate in N'ko would indeed be very beneficial to society as a whole.

A second reason Kanté first translates the Quran into N'ko is that this act grants N'ko instant acceptance. One has to wonder if any one of the 10 Islamic intellectuals who staked their reputations on the accuracy of Kante's N'ko translation became his first Imam disciple. If several were unable to read N'ko and yet they trusted Kanté so wholeheartedly that all they could certify was Kanté reading out loud his N'ko translation, their action makes it clear that Kanté was well-trusted and must have had great charisma. Later, Souleymane Kanté translated other religious texts such as the three volumes of Islamic knowledge, and the three principles of the unity of God.⁶⁵

Kanté also transcribes, or translates and transcribes works from the disciplines of history, sociology, linguistics, literature, and philosophy, and in this manner he opened the doors of a wider world to speakers of Mande languages. More importantly, Kanté writes a three volume history of Mande Civilization, each volume addressing events occurring before, during, and after Sundiata's Malian empire.^{66,67} It is with this history that Kanté jumps from being a mere recorder of established texts to becoming an author. Using N'ko as his medium for writing, Kanté ties together a myriad of stories of royal *jeliw* who had recounted the oral traditions surrounding the Malian empire; everyone who could read N'ko would have access to the information. Like Homer who fixed and thus

standardized the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in the ninth century BCE, the Kanté history of the Mande has become an alternate source to the *jeliw*'s memory. One has to wonder if in time Kanté's history will become the definitive one. Furthermore, the history has helped establish a type of Mande nationalism, for it carries its readers back to the time when the Mandé of the Malian empire were united and powerful, the two virtues denied by the Mande diaspora. Kanté also pens local histories such as a history of the Kaba family of Kankan, a history of the rise to power of *Almami Samori Touré*, a history of Arabs in the Soudan, and a history of the city of Bamako.⁶⁸ Additionally, he transcribes the testimony of oral sources, collects the histories memorized and performed by local *jeliw*, and translates both Arabic and French written sources—sometimes combining them to achieve completed texts.⁶⁹

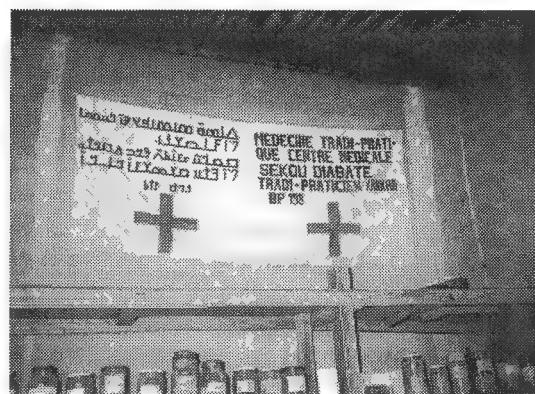
More specifically, Kanté's selection of regional histories includes a monograph on Liberia, one on Sierra Leone, and histories of the Mossi and the Akan.⁷⁰ These monographs supply the histories of Mande speakers in the diaspora, and they also demonstrate their connection with the heartland. Mande speakers of the diaspora trace their heritage back to the heartland.⁷¹ Kanté is remembered as constantly urging individual families to record their histories using N'ko by interviewing elders so as not to lose the knowledge that they possessed. As it happened at the twilight of any oral tradition, writing down the knowledge of the elders that has heretofore been the specific domain of the *jeliw* affects the oral tradition itself. In modern-day Guinea both exist simultaneously. I have had the experience of witnessing a *jeli* use written notes as his mnemonic device.⁷² Kanté's N'ko has also generated individual stories of families done by members regardless of their status. Kanté's own family has done this.

Under the topic of sociology, Kanté writes a text about the rules of marriage, social organization, and peaceful co-existence as related to him by the elders.⁷³ Nationalist sentiments may have led him to highlight these rules of conduct as a hedge against the loss of Mande culture to foreign customs. Kanté also translates *The Declaration of the Rights of Man*, writes texts on the invention of N'ko, primers to teach the writing system, an encyclopedia explaining the works of 50 philosophers since the birth of Jesus Christ, and an N'ko dictionary.^{74,75} The dictionary merits special attention because it ascertains and sets Mande vocabulary, and, as such, it makes Kanté the first African lexicographer of record, placing him in the same company as Samuel Johnson and Noah Webster. Kanté also records Mande poems, songs, stories, and proverbs in N'ko, and he also writes his own poems and stories, such as the poem *Le Capitaine de l'espérance au bord du vaisseau des élites sur l'océan des lumières*, (*The Captain of Hope on Board the Ship of the Elites on the Ocean of the*

Enlightenment) which he wrote for and dedicated it to Ghanaian independence.^{76,77} Kanté presented this poem to Kwame Nkrumah at the celebration in 1957.

Kanté translates works in the exact and experimental sciences from such disciplines as astronomy, botany, geography, geometry, meteorology, mathematics, and zoology.^{78,79} Moreover, he writes math texts and a technical dictionary, his second, of Franco-Maninka scientific terminology, where he details the names of the parts of the internal combustion engine. Of greater significance, however, are his contributions in medicine and the healing arts. He records lists of medicinal plants, the best medical treatments for 317 tropical diseases, and describes Mande healing arts and the medicines for healing—all this transcribed in N'ko.⁸⁰ His book of pharmacopeia is used by Mande healers today to treat the sick.⁸¹

Other than the Quran and the Hadith being translated first, it is difficult to ascertain the dates of Kante's works. Informants speculate that if Kanté had translated scientific works first, people would not have been attracted to the alphabet. They cite one incident that illustrates this contention. In 1957 when Kanté explained that the earth turns on its axis, people who heard him thought that he had gone insane. Scholarship in the old Quranic schools of the area taught that the earth was stationary. Informants remember that N'ko attracted neophytes for purely reli-



N'ko signage at a Pharmacopée (Pharmacopeia) dispensary in Kankan, Republic of Guinea. Pictured are an exterior sign above the entryway door, left, and an interior sign above shelving holding apothecary jars, right. Dianne White Oyler, photographer; date, April 7, 1993.

gious reasons—greater knowledge of Islam. Others were attracted by N'ko's cultural significance; they could learn Mande history, stories, proverbs, and poems. Informants add that the secondary reasons included writing their thoughts in journals or correspondence, and keeping business records in N'ko.⁸²

The translation and transcription of texts into N'ko became his life long occupation. Kanté penned texts in N'ko and reproduced them using a Renault duplication machine capable of printing books of 10 to 20 pages.^{83,84} Once in 1971 when the machine broke down, he journeyed from Kankan to Conakry to request government financial assistance to establish a larger-scale print shop capable of duplicating the N'ko version of the Quran, but help was denied.⁸⁵ However, Kanté had private benefactors. Al-Hadj Kabiné Diané, a printer in Conakry helped Kanté by printing small runs at his Arabic press, and other benefactors paid to have his works printed.^{86,87} Nonetheless, Kanté never gave up hope of receiving financial support from the government to purchase a machine.⁸⁸ Kanté's existence during this period of tremendous effort to turn out N'ko texts attests to his perseverance. It reminds one of Geoffrey Chaucer's Oxford student who spent all his money on books and "gladly he would learn gladly he would teach."⁸⁹ Kanté would sell the printed manuscripts for a small sum to further promote literacy in N'ko in all segments of the community, or else he would give away copies of N'ko books to individuals just to reinforce the reading process. The first two textbooks for learning to write N'ko were often gifts; others were actual texts he had translated.^{90,91} One result was that individuals who received the gifts of books copied them in order to perfect their writing skill, and then they in turn would give their copies as gifts. N'ko students since Kanté's time have always been allowed to make personal copies of their teacher's books.^{92,93} Another result was that these actions created a teaching chain—each one teaching seven others—which has grown geometrically. Many speakers of Mande read N'ko today to the point that one can refer to the phenomenon as a grassroots movement.

N'ko's early dissemination

One manner by which to emphasize N'ko's grassroots nature is to document its rapid spread. In a deliberately empirical manner, Kanté conducted trials to test N'ko's viability. Teaching the alphabet only to his students, he postponed publishing it.⁹⁴ If W.B. Cohen's assessment of the period that Africans were considered culturally inferior by their European conquerors is accurate, then one can infer that government knowledge of formal publications could have been catastrophic in colonial West Africa. Africans were encouraged to take up the European civilizing mission and discouraged from participating in situations which emphasized indigenous cultural development.^{95,96} The French overlords were wary of the potential for a Muslim-initiated African resistance movement that

may attract vast support from their heavily Muslim colonies of West Africa.⁹⁷ Individual Africans did not want to attract attention. They did not want to be seen as challenging the status quo because they believed that anyone whom the French perceived to be a threat disappeared. According to Kanté's brother, while in Côte d'Ivoire Souleymane Kanté had preferred to teach the alphabet only to students rather than to confront Kamal Marwa through editorials in an international journal. Kanté considered that direct confrontation would single him out as an African inventor who was ultimately challenging racists prejudices, and, therefore, colonial behavioral practices for Africans.

One informant asserts that he was Kanté's first student, and that Kanté taught several who lived with him in the Diallo concession in Abidjan.⁹⁸ From the beginning, Kanté taught N'ko to family members, and in 1949, he sent his youngest brother passage money to join him in Abidjan.⁹⁹ But, Kanté's most fertile soil for recruitment was illiterates who had been rejected or left out by the colonial educational system. These first students promoted N'ko outside the notice of colonial governments. There seems to have been great enthusiasm for N'ko from the very beginning.

Family and friends who lived and worked with him in Abidjan propose that Kanté was as systematic with his life as he was with promoting N'ko. His daily routine began with morning prayer, after which he and the visiting brother went to the market place to a table where they sold knives and machetes. N'ko, however, had become Souleymane's first occupation; he preferred to teach N'ko while his younger brother conducted business. After prayers at 4 p.m., he would go rest so that in the evening hours he would be able to teach or translate N'ko.¹⁰⁰ One time when Souleymane traveled to Dakar on business in 1951, his brother recalls, more than 40 people wrote letters to him in N'ko.¹⁰¹ Returning from Dakar, he discovered that a large number of people in Abidjan had learned it. N'ko had taken root.¹⁰²

A fair number of the first students of N'ko were merchants who in turn disseminated the new alphabet along trade routes reaching the farthest corners populated by Mande speakers in West Africa.¹⁰³ Kanté's paternal family first heard of N'ko from letters sent from Abidjan. One family member went to the Côte d'Ivoire to see for himself.¹⁰⁴ Initially, once people learned N'ko, they promoted it, its dissemination becoming a massive collective effort. Thus, it was taught in Soumankoyin-Kölönin by one of Kanté's brothers who recollects trying to duplicate Souleymane's efforts. From member to member of his father's family N'ko spread, and women who married into other communities spread N'ko or else learned it from family members.¹⁰⁵

Kanté's maternal family reported learning the alphabet at the time Souleymane returned to Balandou in 1949 to participate in a circumcision ceremony.¹⁰⁶ There Kanté's first student of N'ko was his uncle who later became the *imam*.¹⁰⁷ His uncle encouraged children to learn N'ko. Kanté sent his first book of N'ko to the 120 residents of Balandou before he returned to promote his alphabet in Balandou in 1951.¹⁰⁸

Being encouraged to do so, a member of Kante's family who had learned N'ko used it for correspondence with friends and family in the city of Bouaké, Côte d'Ivoire. The same person introduced N'ko to Baté Nafadji in 1951; he taught it to his family and the entire town.¹⁰⁹ Kanté's extended family members from Djankana recall that Souleymane requested they learn the alphabet and introduce it to their neighbors.¹¹⁰ Testimonies of N'ko's rapid ascendency abound. Al Hadj Kabiné Diané, reported to have seen the alphabet in Bouaké, learned the alphabet in 1954 along with his brother. The Diané family representative said to me specifically that Kabiné Diané then took it with him to Egypt in 1955.¹¹¹ Merchants from Karifamoriah and one farmer from Kankan believe that they saw N'ko in Abèngörö, Côte d'Ivoire by 1956. They had learned it there and had brought it home to teach their families and others. They claim that Abèngörö was the first town to have learned N'ko.¹¹² Another informant adds that the Quranic scholar of Madina became so interested in the alphabet that he had the informant himself read aloud texts that had been written in N'ko.¹¹³

N'ko literacy tumbled people into the ranks like dominoes. One informant said that he learned that the *imam* at the Météo Mosque in Kankan had been one of Kanté's students in 1954. This informant tried to persuade the *imam* to teach him the alphabet, but to no avail. The informant's brother, on the other hand, went to Abidjan to become a student of N'ko with Kanté himself.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, having heard about N'ko, Taliby Kaba, the nephew and namesake of the well known Islamic scholar Taliby Kaba is reported to have left Kankan for Abidjan in 1955 to learn N'ko. The younger Taliby was reputed to have learned the alphabet in one week.¹¹⁵ Later Taliby Kaba, the nephew, is remembered as teaching informant 22 N'ko in the town of Macenta, Guinea. This indicates that the alphabet had spread along the Guinea-Sierra Leone-Liberia trade routes that run through Macenta.¹¹⁶ Another informant indicated that he first saw the alphabet in 1954 in Koyindou, Sierra Leone, but that he did not learn it until he was in Sédadou, Sierra Leone in 1955.¹¹⁷ Knowledge of the alphabet spiraled out from its home in Abidjan to the farthest end of Mande-speaking areas. Meanwhile, Kanté continued to translate and transcribe N'ko texts for those who had become literate in N'ko.

The reaction to N'ko

The reception of N'ko within the Mande-speaking community was mixed.¹¹⁸ Folks who were literate in either Arabic or French and who had graduated from *médersas* and public schools, respectively, viewed both the alphabet and Kanté negatively. They saw Kanté as uneducated because he had only graduated from a Quranic school. Once when challenged about his schooling, Kanté, a consummate autodidact, said that no university offered a degree in alphabet creation. Arabic scholars opposed the alphabet because it truly had not come from Allah—no matter rumors of divine intervention. Some advised their students not to waste time learning it.¹¹⁹ Some Muslim scholars feared that Arabic might no longer be needed to read the Quran if people learned N'ko. N'ko literacy coupled with the translation of the Quran might effectively reduce their standing within the Islamic community.¹²⁰

Other Mande resisted N'ko for other reasons, including insensitivity to their own culture, the absence of a translated literature, and the belief that N'ko would supercede Arabic or French. As it happens even in our contemporary world, a general atmosphere of mistrust enveloped certain cliques of Mande society. N'ko conferred graphemic equality to speakers of Mande languages. Others feared this turn of events. This situation is paralleled in contemporary American culture in places like Miami, Florida, or Oakland, California which have passed the anti-bilingual and anti-ebonics statutes, where the empowerment of one group through cultural autonomy is opposed by another group who sees the others' freedom as delimiting its own, or else, to make matters worse, through a lens clouded by jingoistic belief and xenophobia. However, too many Mande speakers were attracted to N'ko. As a prolific writer, Kanté made available more and more texts in N'ko, and countless more and more people became interested.

A few intellectuals refused to learn N'ko because they did not know how to integrate the new knowledge into their lives while maintaining the status that they had acquired by learning Arabic, or Arabic and French. The knowledge that they controlled in the two languages was extremely powerful. But many more added that they were drawn to the intellectual challenge of writing their maternal language in an African derived alphabet. Being more interested in academic pursuits rather than in social or political speculation, Souleymane Kanté clarified his intellectual position with regard to N'ko by stating that it was not his intention for people to forget Arabic and French, but to include N'ko.¹²¹

European response to the creation of the alphabet is absent from official accounts written by colonial administrators. The only European reaction remembered by his brother took place at the Surété in

Abidjan. Souleymane had been summoned to the Surété by the police. He did not admit being N'ko's inventor but instead told the police that he himself was in the process of learning it, not an altogether untrue statement. He was allowed to go after telling police that he was a graduate from a Quranic school. Evidently, the French believed that no one with only a Quranic school education could invent an alphabet, adds his brother. The Surété apparently did not document the incident.¹²² Some African civil servants knew about N'ko, but they had learned it surreptitiously, and did not reveal this publicly.¹²³

Formal dissemination 1959–1986

In 1958, Souleymane Kanté returned to Guinea, as did other intellectuals, at the request of Sékou Touré.¹²⁴ Guinea had become an independent nation that year. Kanté is reported to have spoken to Touré about maternal language literacy and maternal language education. There is some confusion about the manner in which this occurred. Some informants hold that Sékou Touré sought out Souleymane Kanté in Abidjan after he indirectly heard about the alphabet. Others insisted that Kanté went on his own to Conakry to present the alphabet to Touré. One informant even claimed to have taught Sékou Touré N'ko after which Touré told the informant to invite Kanté to visit him in Conakry. This point is corroborated by another informant who asserts that the new president of Guinea's First Republic learned N'ko, but that when the political arena heated up, Sékou abandoned his studies. Regardless of who initiated the interview, informants concur on the rest of the story.¹²⁵ Sékou Touré, however, was not interested in using the Mande-styled alphabet as the national writing system for Guinea, but he did become committed to maternal language education, a topic of great concern to all African heads of state in the 1960s.¹²⁶ Touré translated that idea into public policy with the implementation of the National Language Program (NLP) from 1968 to 1984, a program funded by UNESCO in 1965.¹²⁷ The National Language Program formed part of Touré's larger social program, "La Révolution Culturelle Socialiste,"¹²⁸ Touré is reported to have told Kanté that he would only be interested in the new alphabet when Kanté could demonstrate that more than 50 percent of Maninka speakers used it.¹²⁹

Back in Haute-Guinée by 1958, Kanté and his brothers opened a business in the Kankan marketplace where Souleymane resumed teaching N'ko.¹³⁰ Kanté also began teaching at Cherifoula, in one of the prestigious Quranic schools.¹³¹ N'ko teaching flourished: Karamö Karifala Bérété, who had studied in Egypt where he had learned N'ko by

correspondence, taught it; one of Kanté's brothers taught it at his home in the Météo quartier;¹³² Ba Karamö Kaba taught N'ko at Sibidiba in the quartier Banank ödöda; Mamady Daffé taught N'ko in Timbo quartier, until he moved to the school at Sibidiba.^{133,134} N'ko was also taught in Madina quartier supported by the *imam*, and from 1961 to 1970 the Senkèfra quartier supported a school.^{135,136}

On another front, N'ko had given Kanté a reputation as a linguistic authority—a “vernacular intellectual,” as previously observed. Therefore, he was called upon by the teachers of Kankan to contribute to the standardization of the Maninka language in the Roman script; this action became central to Touré's National Language program. One may recall that Kanté had spent years trying to find the best way to write the Maninka language in the Roman alphabet. Kanté acceded although he had disagreed with Touré's dependency upon a foreign alphabet.¹³⁷

Believing the two literacy initiatives were not mutually exclusive, Kanté still offered N'ko to the people as an alternative. Touré's state-funded literacy campaign dominated only the formal educational scene, while Kanté's alternative grew without formal resources.¹³⁸ Oftentimes, during social functions such as funerals, Kanté opened his N'ko Quran and read the Word of God.¹³⁹ Operating on the fringes and in an informal educational environment, Kanté's literacy movement gained support, and this phase of the dissemination became more like a literacy movement rather than a literacy campaign. Informants characterize the period as lacking in organization or formal coordination. Until 1986 literacy in N'ko progressed somewhat haltingly and haphazardly. Only individual initiative fueled N'ko.¹⁴⁰ Ordinary folks were the engine that powered the movement. Some were educators who taught in the public schools, and others were businessmen and workers. Most did it without remuneration. Learning only the N'ko alphabet took about four months. Armed with a blackboard on a tripod and a piece of chalk, teachers employed a methodology similar to that used by Quranic school education: memorization, imitation, and utilization. Students would copy the alphabet on a slate or piece of paper, and then use continual oral recitation for memorization. Neophytes also copied the texts that Kanté had translated and transcribed in an attempt to produce personal or family copies. More advanced students undertook to record the oral histories of aged members of their families in order to preserve knowledge.¹⁴¹ Reliance on oral tradition began to dissipate.

Because N'ko literacy was grounded in the Mande language, Islamic religion, and the protection of indigenous knowledge (i.e., healing arts), the Mande heroic and historic past and the technology of the modern world recorded in N'ko became culturally important; it filled a cultural

void that had been created under French tutelage. The time and effort involved in adding the N'ko writing system to one's literacy repertoire was minimal because it only took four months to learn to write one's maternal language.¹⁴² Four months is the approximate amount of time a Mande speaker would take to learn the alphabet. Reports stated that some people learned it in one week, while others took longer than four months. Knowledge of N'ko literacy reflects only the writing of spoken Mande languages and the reading of texts written in Mande language, and not the knowledge gleaned from a text that has been read. The bonus of N'ko literacy was personal understanding of a wide variety of knowledge, self-improvement, and self reliance. One informant reports that Souleymane Kanté gave the following analogy: N'ko and school are like the sky and the earth. They do not have the same objective, and they are of a different nature.¹⁴³

N'ko's formal dissemination 1986–present

The teaching of N'ko became a coordinated group effort in 1986. As early as the time he spent in Côte d'Ivoire in 1949, Kanté had suggested that N'ko learners should group themselves into an association.¹⁴⁴ By 1978 Kanté began contacting disciples about forming an association that would bind together everyone interested in N'ko. Its directors would be those who could answer questions about N'ko as he himself would answer them, and they would promote learning the alphabet in Kankan as well as its environs.¹⁴⁵ Eight years later in 1986, Kanté founded a national executive board of Mande speakers in Conakry, *l'Association pour l'Impulsion et la Coordination des Recherches sur l'Alphabet N'ko*, (ICRA-N'KO).¹⁴⁶ The members of the board were literate in N'ko, were delegated to speak for Kanté, and directed and coordinated the learning of the alphabet. After Kanté's death November 23, 1987 from complications associated with diabetes, ICRA-N'KO took the initiative of sending representatives to and opening N'ko offices in many villages.^{147,148}

ICRA-N'KO continues to promote N'ko in much the same way as did earlier individual networks. Adept writers and readers of N'ko first sensitize Mande speakers to N'ko's benefits. Second, they dispense books as gifts or offer them as commodities for sale in the market. Third, they support the dissemination of N'ko throughout West Africa by seeking out patrons in each community. Patrons give by offering moral guidance and monetary gifts. Having achieved non-governmental organization (NGO) status, the association has the ability to promote N'ko on Guinea's radio and television stations. Often ICRA-N'KO advertises its meetings and its activities, and they have produced programs about the alphabet.

ICRA-N'KO has also hosted celebrations, such as the one on the date designated as the founding of N'ko, April 14, and the one that I attended held in 1993.^{149,150} In 1988 ICRA-N'KO and Julius Nyerere University in Kankan collaborated in holding a conference, thus ushering in N'ko's 40th anniversary.¹⁵¹

The Secrétariat d'Etat à la Décentralisation (SED) of the Second Republic granted ICRA-N'KO the status of NGO on June 22, 1991.¹⁵² Since then the association has opened a branch in each of Guinea's 42 prefectures and in Conakry. By becoming an NGO, it has expanded its influence. During the 1990s and across Guinea, the prefecture level branches supervised 179 functioning centers of instruction with 15,000 students.¹⁵³ Each local branch has a secretary-general, his assistant, a treasurer, counselors, and deputies for teaching N'ko and for social affairs.¹⁵⁴ The executive branch in Conakry coordinates N'ko activities, including printing books, teaching, public relations, medicine, and soliciting aid from international associations and Guinea's government.¹⁵⁵ One very important activity has been to acquire statistical data about literacy in N'ko by insisting on accurate records of the numbers of students taking classes. Furthermore, the government officially has designated ICRA-N'KO as the principal promoter of the N'ko literacy campaign for Mande speakers. After four decades without political and institutional support, responsibility for the literacy campaign has devolved from individuals to this organization.

One definition of a literacy campaign states that it features goals, mobilization through some governmental or institutional organization, a source of motivation (such as a charismatic figure), and materials.¹⁵⁶ Therefore, one could argue that prior to 1990 there has been no N'ko literacy campaign because the promotion of the N'ko alphabet was not supported by Guinea's government. Additionally, even the acceptance of N'ko literacy statistics by the Third Republic since 1990 would not mark the N'ko movement as a literacy campaign because it lacks systematization and a specific time frame. Nonetheless, one cannot reasonably deny that N'ko is a wide-spread grassroots literacy movement, and different distinctions must be made in order to define it.

In Kankan ICRA-N'KO has sought support from the Soti and a benediction from the Grand *Imam*.¹⁵⁷ Moussa Camara, the prefect, has lent his support to the organization.¹⁵⁸ Under the auspices of its former mayor, Mamadi Kaba, Kankan donated land in 1992 for an N'ko school located behind the Banque Internationale pour le Commerce et l'Industrie de la Guinée (BICIGUI) near the center of town, and it commissioned the architectural drawings for a building that houses six classrooms, a library and reading room, and offices for the Kankan branch of ICRA-

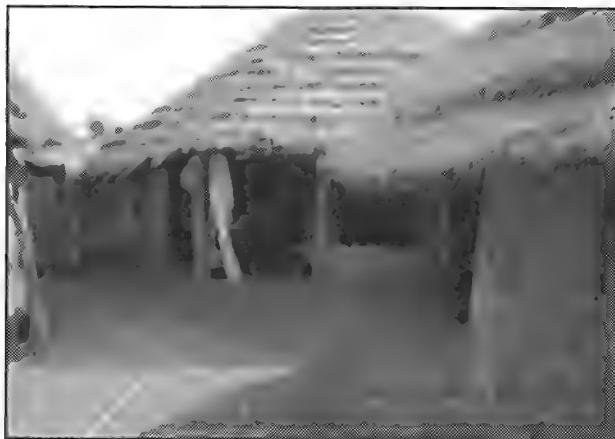
N'KO.¹⁵⁹ The patron for N'ko in Kankan, Al Hadj Sidafa Sano, provided the building materials.¹⁶⁰ Many people hope that with a formal school, Kankan can regain its stellar reputation for promoting literacy in N'ko. Two other properties have been given to the Kankan branch of ICRA-N'KO for building a school, but a lack of funds stopped the project.¹⁶¹ The private school in the Senkèfra *quartier* of Kankan received a building in 1990, the expense for which was shouldered by its three teachers. In 1993 the school was operating at the beginning level with a student population of 98.¹⁶² (See Appendix C for Partial Student Class Roll during the spring of 1993.) A private school existed in Timbo *quartier* of Kankan from 1990–2000. The classroom space was donated by a property owner who did not know N'ko himself but was a patron because he loved his maternal language. Another benefactor bought the benches for the classroom and also paid the N'ko teacher for his services.¹⁶³ In addition to these facilities, N'ko education continues in the compounds of teachers—two large compound schools are found in the *quartiers* of Météo and Salamani. Teaching also takes place in the market where merchants who use N'ko for their businesses teach fellow merchants their skills.¹⁶⁴ Having returned to Kankan the summer of 2000, I conducted another literacy survey whose preliminary results show that in Senkèfra *quartier* 50 percent of men, women, and children, ages five and older, can read and write N'ko, and in Timbo *quartier* 30 percent of men, women, and children, ages five and older, can read and write N'ko.

Infused with pride in their cultural identity and cultural heritage, Mande speakers have become motivated to recast their marginalized status imposed upon them by foreigners into something positive. They have sought the reproduction of information. The N'ko alphabet has created a grassroots movement whose purpose has been to disseminate universal knowledge. N'ko literacy has become the foundation of a larger intellectual movement by people who have felt marginalized by the cultural practices of colonial domination.

Just as the Age of Enlightenment in Europe united many intellectuals across international borders by fostering an acceptance of reason as a common denominator, N'ko has united the speakers of Mande languages in a transnational manner. Although one may not be able to determine without a shadow of a doubt if Kanté himself was influenced specifically by European Enlightenment thinkers or whether the Mande move toward their own era of Enlightenment has been encouraged by the study of French culture, the affinities abound, and Kanté read copiously and eclectically. In the French political arena first there was a struggle for governmental acceptance which was not granted until a later government. Similarly, Kanté struggled with Sékou Touré during Guinea's First Republic, only to gain acceptance by the Second Republic of Lansana



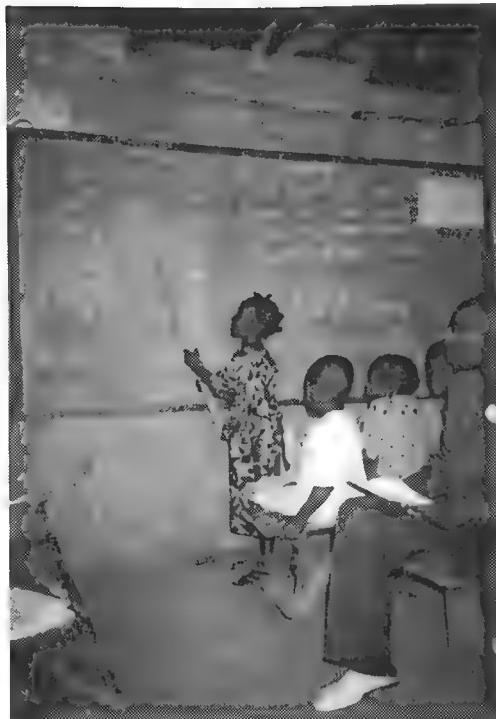
N'ko school building in central Kankan, Haute-Guinée. Photograph, D. White Oyler, date, July 25, 2000.



Above: N'ko school buildings in Senkèfra quartier, Kankan, Haute-Guinée.
Below: Students in a classroom at the N'ko school in Senkèfra quartier, Kankan, Haute-Guinée.
Photographs, D. White Oyler, date, April 12, 1993.

Above: A young girl stands at the blackboard while other students watch in the N'ko school in Timbo quartier, Kankan, Haute-Guinée. Photograph by D. White Oyler, date, April 7, 1993.

Below: Exterior views of the N'ko school buildings in Timbo quartier, Kankan, Haute-Guinée. Photograph, D. White Oyler.



Conté. However, European Enlightenment thinkers and their Mande counterparts have both envisioned progress in knowledge and in technical achievement through proper education.

Notes

¹ Group interview 46, June 19, 1993, in Kankan; and group interview 08, March 8, 1993, in Karifamoriah.

² Interview 70, July 18, 1993, in Conakry; in interview 22, April 9, 1993, in Kankan, the informant reported that the Lebanese journalist had traveled to several colonies and was visiting his brothers in Bingerville, Côte d'Ivoire.

³ Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan; and interview 08, March 8, 1993, in Karifamoriah.

⁴ Harry Elmer Barnes, *A History of Historical Writing*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1963) pp. 152–153.

⁵ Group interview 26, April 26, 1993, in Soumankoyin-Kölönin; interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan; group interview 17, April 5, 1993, in Balandou; interview 62, July 14, 1993, in Conakry; and interview 70, July 18, 1993, in Conakry. One informant said that he was with Kanté on his trek to Côte d'Ivoire. Group interview 18, April 5, 1993, in Balandou.

⁶ Interview 62, July 14, 1993, in Conakry.

⁷ Group interview 17, April 5, 1993, in Balandou; interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan; and Souleymane's sisters said that they had learned of their brother's trip to Côte d'Ivoire when their mother received a letter from him. Group interview 52, June 22, 1993, in Djankana.

⁸ According to one informant, all the young adventurers departed for Abidjan. Interview 70, July 18, 1993, in Conakry. A fellow student who had known Souleymane at his father's school confirmed that Kanté went to Côte d'Ivoire for economic reasons. He says that Kanté wrote him letters in Arabic in which he discussed nothing but a commerce venture with Al Hadj Narombe Sory. Interview 28, April 27, 1993, in Soumankoyin-Pöpökö. Another informant stated that Souleymane Kanté began his career as a merchant of Kola in Bingerville. Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan. Group interview 08, March 8, 1993 in Karifamoriah.

⁹ Interview 62, July 14, 1993, in Conakry; and interview 08, March 8, 1993 in Karifamoriah.

¹⁰ Group interview 08, March 8, 1993, in Karifamoriah. Definition used by Patrick Manning, *Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa 1880–1985*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 60

¹¹ Interview 68, July 17, 1993, in Conakry. In group interview 17, April 5, 1993, in Balandou, an informant from the maternal side of

Souleymane's family says that he had traveled to Sierra Leone before going on to Côte d'Ivoire, but he is the only informant to say this.

¹² Interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan. This story is confirmed in the accounts of the maternal family in group interview 17, April 5, 1993, in Balandou.

¹³ Interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan; interview 22, April 9, 1993, in Kankan; interview 32, May 8, 1993, in Kankan, and interview 35, May 11, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁴ Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan; and interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁵ Group interview 18, April 5, 1993, in Balandou.

¹⁶ Interview 31, May 8, 1993, in Kankan. A member of the maternal side of Kanté's family spoke of visiting Kanté in Côte d'Ivoire, in group interview 17, April 5, 1993, in Balandou.

¹⁷ Interview 49, June 20, 1993, in Kankan; and interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁸ Group interview 27, April 26, 1993, in Soumankoyin-Kölönin.

¹⁹ Interview 05, March 3, 1993, in Kankan.

²⁰ Interview 62, July 14, 1993, in Conakry.

²¹ Interview 49, June 20, 1993, in Kankan; interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan; and group interview 08, March 8, 1993, in Karifamoriah. In interview 26, April 26, 1993, in Soumankoyin-Kölönin, however, an elder brother disputes the fact that Souleymane was a merchant of any kind, saying instead that Souleymane was consumed only by intellectual pursuits.

²² Interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan.

²³ Group interview 08, March 8, 1993, in Karifamoriah.

²⁴ Interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan.

²⁵ Interview 62, July 14, 1993, in Conakry; and interview 70, July 18, 1993, in Conakry.

²⁶ Kanté's brother related the Maninka proverb in interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan, which was given the following French translation: "*Prendre le toit de la cas d'un village pour couvrir celle d'un autre, si le toit ne sera pas grand il sera petit.*" Since proverbs state their meaning indirectly, the above translation is my interpretation of its clarifying message.

²⁷ Interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan; and interview 70, July 18, 1993.

²⁸ Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan

²⁹ Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan.

³⁰ Interview 62, July 14, 1993, in Conakry; interview 70, July 18, 1993, in Conakry; and interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan.

Souleymane Kanté's experiments reinforced by his acquisition of Arabic literacy as an Islamic scholar were responsible for the selection of this right to left orientation. It cannot be known if this was a political statement against the left to right orientation of Europeans thus rejecting African deculturation by Europeans.³¹

³¹ Interview 32, May 8, 1993, in Kankan. The writer employs diacritical marks to indicate changes in tonality.

³² Djaka Laye Kaba, "Souleymane Kanté: l'inventeur de l'alphabet N'ko," *L'Éducateur*, No. 11 & 12, avril–juin, , juillet–septembre, 1992, p. 33. A member of Souleymane Kanté's family recounted seeing the alphabet in Bouaké in 1949. Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan. Interview 32, May 8, 1993 in Kankan.

³³ The Quran written in the N'ko alphabet is published in Cairo. I saw this book on several occasions in different cities in West Africa and I own a copy.

³⁴ Informants discussed Souleymane's capacity to invent N'ko. Within the Islamic community, there had been dialogue among early critics as to whether or not the invention had been sanctioned by God. Interviews 26 and 27, April 26, 1993, in Soumankoyin-Kölönin; interview 51, June 22, 1993, in Djankana; and interview 68, July 17, 1993, in Conakry.

³⁵ Group interview 45, June 17, 1993, in Kankan.

³⁶ Interview 26, April 26, 1993, in Soumankoyin-Kölönin; group interview 17, April 5, 1993 in Balandou; interview 05, March 1, 1993, in Kankan; interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan; interview 32, May 8, 1993, in Kankan; and group interview 08, March 8, 1993, in Karifamoriah.

³⁷ Interview 35, May 11, 1993, in Kankan.

³⁸ Interview 26, April 26, 1993, in Soumankoyin-Kölönin; and group interview 17, April 5, 1993, in Balandou.

³⁹ Group interview 18, April 5, 1993 in Balandou.

⁴⁰ Group interview 45, June 17, 1993, in Kankan.

⁴¹ Group interview 08, March 9, 1993, in Karifamoriah.

⁴² Interview 32, May 8, 1993, in Kankan.

⁴³ Group interview 45, June 17, 1993, in Kankan.

⁴⁴ Interview 05, March 3, 1993, in Kankan.

⁴⁵ Group interview 52, June 22, 1993, in Djankana.

⁴⁶ Group interview 17, April 5, 1993, in Balandou; and interview 70, July 18, 1993, in Conakry.

⁴⁷ Group interview 17, April 5, 1993, in Balandou.

⁴⁸ Group interview 18, April 5, 1993, in Balandou.

⁴⁹ Interview 35, May 11, 1993, in Kankan.

⁵⁰ Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan; interview 35, May 11, 1993, in Kankan; and interview 38, May 13, in Bankalan.

⁵¹ Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan.

- ⁵² Interview 51, June 22, 1993, in Djankana.
- ⁵³ Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan.
- ⁵⁴ Interview 35, May 11, 1993, in Kankan.
- ⁵⁵ See endnote no. 45 in Chapter 1.
- ⁵⁶ Djibril Tamsir Niane, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*. Translated by G.D. Pickett. London: Longman African Classics, 1986, p. 55.
- ⁵⁷ Group interview 18, April 5, 1993, in Balandou.
- ⁵⁸ Group interview 17, April 5, 1993, in Balandou.
- ⁵⁹ Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan.
- ⁶⁰ Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan.
- ⁶¹ Daniel P. Resnick and Lauren B. Resnick, "The Nature of Literacy: An Historical Exploration," *Harvard Educational Review*, Volume 47, Number 3, 1977, pp. 383–384.
- ⁶² Interview 62, July 14, 1993, in Conakry; interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan; and interview 70, July 18, 1993, in Conakry.
- ⁶³ According to one informant, Souleymane Kanté translated the Quran and the first Hadith in Bamako where he lived in Dyiukodönin, on the other side of the river behind the petit market. Group interview 18, April 5, 1993, in Balandou.
- ⁶⁴ Interview 35, May 11, 1993, in Kankan.
- ⁶⁵ Fodé Baba Condé, "Souleymane Kanté, Auteur Meconnu et la Litterature du N'ko," Memoire. Université Julius Nyerere, Kankan, 1990, p. 17.
- ⁶⁶ Dianne White Oyler, "The N'ko Alphabet as a Vehicle of Indigenist Historiography," *History in Africa* 24 (1997), 239–256.
- ⁶⁷ A copy of the title page and two pages from one of the volumes of Mande history can be found in Appendix C. I own a copy of the history of the Manding for 4000 years written in N'ko.
- ⁶⁸ I have not personally seen all of the titles listed. It seems that only titles that are important for the entire Mande-speaking world have found their way into publication. Because the source of publication is Cairo and because publishers only do limited runs, published texts are scarce. In a conversation with me, Fodé Baba Condé said that he had seen many of the manuscripts in the personal libraries of his informants as he conducted the research for this Memoire.
- ⁶⁹ Fodé Baba Condé, pp. 18–19.
- ⁷⁰ I have not personally seen these manuscripts. Fodé Baba Condé, pp. 18–19.
- ⁷¹ I have not personally seen these manuscripts. Fodé Baba Condé, pp. 18–19.
- ⁷² Dianne White Oyler, "Re-inventing Oral Tradition: The Modern Epic of Souleymane Kanté," *Research in African Literatures*, Vol 33, No. 1 (Spring 2002) p. 75–93.

⁷³ I possess a book on Mande Social Customs. This particular work is printed rather than a copy of a hand-written manuscript.

⁷⁴ I possess a copy of the first book of N'ko, N'ko Primers I and II, by Souleymane Kanté, the French-N'ko primer written by Ibrahim Kanté, Souleymane Kanté's son, and an N'ko dictionary. (See Appendix C for samples.)

⁷⁵ Fodé Baba Condé, pp. 18–19.

⁷⁶ I have seen these texts. Included in Appendix C is a portion of the poem dedicated to Ghanaian independence. It also contains a copy of a portion of the newly formed N'ko tradition while Appendix D contains the English translation.

⁷⁷ Interview 31, May 8, 1993, in Kankan; and interview 32, May 8, 1993, in Kankan. Fodé Baba Condé, pp. 18–19.

⁷⁸ Although I have not seen the manuscripts of all the science related texts, I have a copy of a general science text. See Appendix C for an example of science written in N'ko.

⁷⁹ Fodé Baba Condé, p. 20. I have not seen these monographs.

⁸⁰ Fodé Baba Condé, p. 18.

⁸¹ I have seen the N'ko books used by my four informants who are pharmacoepia practitioners. N'ko is used to write signs for the dispensary. (See photos page 95.)

⁸² Interview 05, March 3, 1993, in Kankan.

⁸³ A local merchant, Sékou Diané, is remembered to have given Souleymane Kanté money to buy this machine in Abidjan. Interview 29, May 3, 1993, in Kankan.

⁸⁴ Interview 68, July 17, 1993, in Conakry.

⁸⁵ Interview 49, June 20, 1993, in Kankan.

⁸⁶ Interview 82, August 10, 1994, in Conakry.

⁸⁷ Interview 82, August 10, 1994, in Conakry; in Bamako, Al-Hadj Sékou Camara gave Kanté money to print certain manuscripts. Interview 62, 1993, in Conakry.

⁸⁸ Interview 49, June 20, 1993, in Kankan.

⁸⁹ Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Canterbury Tales — General Prologue," in *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces Volume I*, Fifth Edition, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1956) p. 1440.

⁹⁰ Interview 32, May 8, 1993, in Kankan.

⁹¹ Group interview 17, April 5, 1993, in Balandou; interview 21, April 8, 1993, in Kankan; group interview 25, April 13, 1993, in Karifamoriah; interview 26, April 26, 1993, in Sounmankoyin-Kölönin; interview 32, May 8, 1993, in Kankan; and interview 38, May 13, 1993, in Balandou.

⁹² The tradition of copying books dates from the time when people who could not afford to make the Hadj, the pilgrimage, copied the

Islamic texts brought back by people who had. In interview 19, April 6, 1993, in Kankan, the informant relates that his father had copied the Quran in Arabic seven times for which he received a gift, usually in cattle.

⁹³ One informant explained that each time he had finished a book he would copy it again. Once Souleymane Kanté had asked him to recopy the book entitled *The Rules of Marriage* and to send it to him because he had lost his own copy. Group interview 25, April 13, 1993, in Karifamorah.

⁹⁴ Interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan.

⁹⁵ William B. Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans: White Response to Blacks, 1530–1880*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 237.

⁹⁶ Louis Brenner, *Muslim Identity and Social Change in Sub-Saharan Africa*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 76.

⁹⁷ Brenner, *Identity*, p. 61.

⁹⁸ One of Souleymane Kanté's brothers identified one of the informants in interview 84 as being Kanté's first student. Interview 62, July 14, 1993, in Conakry; and in group interview 84, August 15, 1994, in Abidjan, the informant named above claimed to be Kante's first student.

⁹⁹ Interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁰⁰ Interview 51, June 22, 1993, in Djankana; and interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁰¹ Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁰² The informant recounted his visit to Abidjan in 1953, where he witnessed people learning N'ko, interview 35, May 11, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁰³ According to the informants in group interview 08, March 8, 1993, in Karifamorah, at the time only Maninka-speaking long-distance traders were merchants in Abidjan. When the exploitation of the Sefadou diamond mines in Sierra Leone began, many of these merchants carried the ability to write and teach N'ko with them into the new market place.

¹⁰⁴ Group interview 27, April 26, 1993, in Soumankoyin-Kölönin.

¹⁰⁵ One of Souleymane Kanté's sisters said that she learned N'ko from a brother while the other said that she had learned it from her sister-in-law.

Group interview 52, June 22, 1993, in Djankana.

¹⁰⁶ Group interview 17, April 5, 1993, in Balandou.

¹⁰⁷ Group interview 18, April 5, 1993, in Balandou.

¹⁰⁸ Group interview 18, April 5, 1993, in Balandou.

¹⁰⁹ Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan.

¹¹⁰ Interview 70, July 18, 1993, in Conakry.

¹¹¹ Interview 82, August 10, 1994, in Conakry.

¹¹² Group interview 08, March 8, 1993, in Karifamorah; and group interview 46, June 19, 1993, in Kankan.

¹¹³ Interview 32, May 8, 1993, in Kankan.

¹¹⁴ Interview 22, April 9, 1993, in Kankan.

¹¹⁵ The N'ko alphabet appeared to please the elder Taliby, and because of that the informant in interview 22, April 9, 1993, in Kankan, reported that Taliby encouraged everyone to learn it. Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan; and Interview 32, May 8, 1993 in Kankan. The informant confirms that he saw the younger Taliby teaching N'ko in 1959.

¹¹⁶ Interview 22, April 9, 1993, in Kankan.

¹¹⁷ Interview 32, May 1993, in Kankan.

¹¹⁸ The characterization of the reaction to the invention comes from informants who support the acquisition of N'ko literacy. While their perceptions of the attitudes, events, and motivations falter under the scrutiny of the accuracy of observation, transmission, and memory, they call upon the knowledge passed to them through conversations with the inventor and their experiences in the Mande speaking community as the alphabet was disseminated. Their presentation of the facts as they interpret them provides the only existing window available to the event and the community's reaction.

¹¹⁹ Interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan; interview 62, July 14, 1993, in Conakry; interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan; and interview 05, March 3, 1993, in Kankan.

¹²⁰ Interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan.

¹²¹ Group interview 46, June 19, 1993, in Kankan.

¹²² Souleymane Kanté's brother told this story as a part of his experiences while living with Souleymane in Abidjan. Interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan. However, in group interview 84, August 15, 1994, in Abidjan, neither informant who had known Kanté well during this period could corroborate the story. If the story is true, perhaps Kanté did not discuss it for security reasons. I also heard the story from informant 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan.

¹²³ In 1956, a government official named Moussa Diakité surreptitiously learned the alphabet, reported in interview 32, May 8, 1993, in Kankan.

¹²⁴ Prior to independence, many Guineans were dispersed throughout West Africa. Some were employed by the French as bureaucrats, teachers, or as railroad transportation workers. Others, including a large number of Maninka speakers, were dispersed along West African trade routes.

¹²⁵ Informant 51, June 22, 1993, in Djankana, interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan, interview 80, July 20, 1994, in Conakry, and in interview 81, August 9, 1994, in Conakry.

¹²⁶ Choosing the Mande language as the national language of Guinea or even institutionalizing the Mande-styled alphabet for orthography in Guinea would have caused ethnic rivalries between the Mande speakers and the other ethnic groups. Additionally, despite the author's claims of N'ko's universality, it was not in the

sense of mutual intelligibility. For example, the N'ko alphabet would accommodate the tonality of the 20 languages found in Guinea. However, Mande speakers could write the Maninka language in N'ko, Susu speakers could write the Susu language in N'ko, and Pular speakers could write the Pular language in N'ko, but while the script was the same, the languages would not be mutually intelligible. Thus, the reader would have to be multi-lingual.

¹²⁷ Sékou Touré, "Débat culturel: The Chef de l'Etat sur les langues africaines," *Horoya*, No 2889, du 25 au 31 octobre 1981, pp. 13–16; UNESCO, *The Experimental World Literacy Programme: A Critical Assessment*, (Paris: The UNESCO Press, 1976), p. 42.

¹²⁸ UNESCO considered its program separate from the government's national campaign. Interestingly enough, the UNESCO funds were not used for a pilot project in Haute-Guinée. The program targeted 3,500 illiterate and newly-literate industrial workers in Conakry and 75,000 illiterate farmers living in lower Guinea (Basse Guinée) where the Susu language is spoken, middle Guinea (Moyenne Guinée) where Pular language is spoken, and the forest region (Guinée Forestière) where the languages spoken include Kissi, Guerzé, and Toma. UNESCO, p. 42–43.

¹²⁹ In group interview 43, May 18, 1993, in Kankan, one informant stated that Sékou Touré has promised Souleymane Kanté that he would build a school for N'ko.

¹³⁰ Interview 49, June 29, 1993, in Kankan.

¹³¹ Interview 32, May 8, 1993, in Kankan.

¹³² Group interview 45, June 17, 1993, group interview 47, June 19, 1993, and interview 59, June 28, 1993, all in Kankan.

¹³³ Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan.

¹³⁴ Interview 43, May 18, 1993, in Kankan.

¹³⁵ Interview 32, May 8, 1993, in Kankan. The informant was the teacher.

¹³⁶ Interview 05, March 3, 1993, in Kankan.

¹³⁷ Dianne White Oyler, "A Cultural Revolution in Africa: The Role of Literacy in the Republic of Guinea Since Independence," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (2001), p. 585–600.

¹³⁸ When Kanté returned to Guinea, he received a 200,000 CFA monetary gift from Sékou Touré as a reward for his achievement. Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan; interview 60, July 9, 1993, in Conakry; interview 68, July 7, 1993, in Conakry; interview 80, July 20, 1994, in Conakry; interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan; and group interview 84, August 15, 1994, in Abidjan. One local authority, Taliby Kaba, is remembered as promoting N'ko literacy and having

rewarded Kanté with a gift of 40,000 CFA. Interview 26, 1993, in Soumankoyin-Kölönin.

¹³⁹ Interview 60, July 9, 1993, in Conakry.

¹⁴⁰ The lack of a centralized effort makes it impossible to know who was studying N'ko or how many people became literate in N'ko during this initial phase.

¹⁴¹ Those who were literate in N'ko were spoken of as preserving for posterity the oral histories of elders. Interview 05, March 3, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁴² Brian V. Street has pointed out that people frequently maintain a number of different literacies side by side, using them for different purposes. Found in "Literacy and Social Change: the Significance of Social Context in the Development of Literacy Programs," in *The Future of Literacy in a Changing World*, Daniel A. Wagner ed. (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1987), p. 62.

¹⁴³ Interview 70, July 18, 1993, in Conakry.

¹⁴⁴ Interview 31, May 8, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁴⁵ In interview 32, May 8, 1993, in Kankan, the informant related that Kanté had written to him and suggested that he find two, or three, people who knew N'ko to serve as a board for such a group. Later, Kanté visited him in Kankan, and they discussed the matter. In interview 34, May 10, 1993, in Kankan, the informants cite the beginning of the association ICRA-N'KO in Kankan as 1978.

¹⁴⁶ In a letter to the Department of Tradition, Medicine, and Pharmacopée, the president of ICRA-N'KO lists the responsibilities of the association as the promotion of literacy and medical research. June 18, 1992.

¹⁴⁷ Interview 68, July 17, 1993, in Conakry; interview 68, July 17, 1993, in Conakry, and interview, 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁴⁸ Interview 49, June 20, 1993, in Kankan; interview 68, July 17, 1993, in Conakry; and interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁴⁹ Interview 56, June 24, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁵⁰ After my meeting with the national executive board of ICRA-N'KO in October 1992, the radio station in Conakry aired a short welcoming statement to me which advertised N'ko. In Kankan, each N'ko meeting was preceded by a radio announcement of the meeting. In August 1994, their announcements included information that I was in Kankan on a return visit. The meeting was attended by people that I had met in Kankan, the Baté, Haute-Guinée, and as far away as Côte d'Ivoire. The Literacy Surveys that I conducted in Kankan in 1994 and 2000 were prefaced by two days of advertisements by ICRA-N'KO that we were doing an investigation into literacy and that the populations

should cooperate with canvassers who could be identified by their ICRA-N'KO badges.

¹⁵¹ Interview 05, March 3, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁵² Interview 68, July 17, 1993, in Conakry. Official press release to Agence Guinéenne de Presse, No. 1934, Wednesday, December 23, 1992, on the history of ICRA-N'KO, p. 6.

¹⁵³ In interview 68, July 17, 1993, in Conakry, the president of the National Bureau of ICRA-N'KO showed documentation of N'ko centers. The official press release to Agence Guinéenne de Presse, No. 1934, claimed 15,000 students were learning N'ko. p. 5.

¹⁵⁴ Interview 32, May 8, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁵⁵ Interview 56, June 24, 1993, in Kankan; and group interview 41, May 12, 1993, in Gbeleman; in interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan, the informant said that ICRA-N'KO always calls upon the Kankan branch to send teachers to villages. However, there are always more requests than there are available teachers to relocate.

¹⁵⁶ Robert F. Arnove and Harvey J. Graff, eds. *National Literacy Campaigns: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, (New York: Plenum Press, 1987), pp. 3-20.

¹⁵⁷ Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁵⁸ Interview 22, April 9, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁵⁹ Interview 22, April 9, 1993, in Kankan; and interview 56, June 24, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁶⁰ Interview 29, May 3, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁶¹ One informant who considers himself a patron stated that in 1986 he gave a piece of property to build an N'ko school. However, there has been no money available to build a facility at this site. Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁶² Group interview 24, April 12, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁶³ Interview 22, April 9, 1993, in Kankan and in interview 56, June 24, 1993, in Kankan, the informant explained that as a patron he contributed to N'ko education because he earns a good living through the Mande healing arts and medicines for which he uses N'ko.

¹⁶⁴ I witnessed this in the food market at Dibida among the merchants who sold dry goods, pots and pans, and eating utensils. One could always identify a store where the merchant used N'ko because it had an N'ko calendar.

Chapter 5

Cultural Nationalism in the Mande Diaspora — N'ko's International Dimension

Dissemination of N'ko as a transnational process

Radiating out from Kankan during the years 1949 to 1959 one can document the spread of N'ko schools throughout the Baté. One cannot be sure, however, exactly how many villages supported teachers and schools because records are non-existent. Informants have reported schools existing in Baté villages close to Kankan. For example in Balandou the maternal family of Souleymane Kanté, supported by the *imam*, began teaching N'ko.¹ In 1965 Al-Hadj Djiba Kaba brought N'ko to Bankalan and began teaching it to small groups, and approximately 40 people learned N'ko in Bankalan during that period.² The alphabet was introduced into Karifamoriah in the 1950s by Al-Hadj N'Faly Dömanèn, who had learned it from Souleymane Kanté. Karifala Bérété opened a *médersa* in Lorombo where he taught Arabic and N'ko.³ Al-Hadj Oumar taught N'ko at Amara's *médersa* in Baté Nafadji.⁴ Another informant claimed to have taught 82 students in Koumban at that time.⁵

In addition, other schools can be identified in the region of Haute-Guinée. In 1957 teachers were instructing miners from the diamond mines in Kérouané whose students learned at night.⁶ As early as the 1960s in Kissidougou students were learning N'ko, and teaching it in Faranah as late as 1968.^{7,8} To the South in Guinée Forestière one finds schools in Macenta where Taliby Kaba, named for his uncle the Islamic scholar Taliby Kaba, taught N'ko.⁹ In Macenta as elsewhere there was no coordinated effort in the teaching of N'ko, but students usually learned it in the compounds of their teachers after work and after evening prayers.¹⁰ In 1956 N'ko was taught in the evening to the miners at Famörödou.¹¹ In 1956 Souleymane Kanté presented the alphabet to the town of N'Zérékoré; classes were taught there in 1958 at the *médersa* of Fodé Sorby Camara.¹²

During the later period of individual initiative (1959–1986), in the Baté and Haute-Guinée schools were still active in the villages of Baté Nafadji, Koumban, and Balandou, and in the cities of Faranah and Kissidougou.¹³ Also the village of Forecariah and the cities of Siguiri and Kouroussa added schools. The city of Karifamoriah had a building to use as a school; in 1993 it was renovated and the school temporarily returned to the teacher's compound.^{14,15} The local village administrator of Bankalan, the *Douti*, had a building constructed for the N'ko school in 1989, and the local branch of ICRA–N'KO keeps its office in the district office build-

ing.¹⁶ This school reports that it has graduated 63 students, 2 of whom are girls.¹⁷ In Gbeleman, the local patron for N'ko built a school in 1991 with help from its students.¹⁸ In this case, the students had asked for the school, and thus their help in building it became their contribution to the community; its classes are taught at night with two students coming from as far as Sanakodö and Makono. By 1993 it had 60 students—28 girls and 32 boys, and there was a waiting list of 218 persons—87 women, 56 girls, 52 boys, and 20 men.¹⁹ The Kankan branch of ICRA–N'KO has helped the school by supplying a teacher and four boxes of chalk.²⁰

N'ko's rapid dissemination is evident. Maninka-speaking communities in each of Guinea's prefectures also teach N'ko.²¹ In Guinéa Forestière, it is taught in Maninka-speaking communities located in the primarily Toma (Loma) and Guérzé speaking areas of Macenta, N'Zérékoré, and Guéckédou.²² By 1993 there were 2 teachers and 72 students, only one of whom was female. There all the students were Mande speakers with the exception of one Poulear speaker. Moreover, 300 students are found studying N'ko in schools at Arien, Kouankan, Koyaman, Gbondodou District, Gbendekala, and Seredou. The local authorities at N'Zérékoré encourage learning N'ko, and although they have no building, N'ko classes are held from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. in the "Sacred Forest." One can also find N'ko taught in businesses in the marketplace in N'Zérékoré and in Kérouané. At Guéckédou classes are taught in the teachers' compounds.

Further, the Conakry branch of ICRA–N'KO supports three schools in the capital. In 1993 N'ko classes were taught after school hours in the Gbessia *quartier* and at the Matoto Market in a warehouse.²³ In 1992 these schools had 89 students—70 males ranging in their ages from 9 to 60 and 19 females, ranging in ages 18 to 40.²⁴ The Conakry branch supports branches in the interior and aids the executive branch in its organization and promotion of the alphabet.

N'ko during the Mande diaspora

The process of Mande geographical displacement which occurred in their diaspora has made "being Mande" a concept which is based more on cultural identity than it is a statement about geographical location. Rather than tied to a land, the Mande are tied to a culture which encompasses several countries which include Mali, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, the Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Nigeria. In a significant manner, large groups of people I encountered in my research in West Africa identified themselves as Mande rather than as nationals of a specific country. Maybe this is one reason for N'ko's ascendancy as an instrument of Mande culture: N'ko has allowed the Mande to establish a



Left: Teachers and students at the N'ko school in Bankalan, Haute-Guinée, date, May 13, 1993.

Below, middle: N'ko compound school at Gbeleman with a large group of students, date May 12, 1993.

Below, bottom: Teacher and students of the N'ko compound school at Karifamoriah, Haute-Guinée, date, March 8, 1993.
Photographs by D. White Oyler.





Above: A group of students at the compound school in Guéckédou, Guinée Forestière. Below: The Pharmacopée (pharmacy) on the main road in N'Zérékoré, Guinée Forestière prominently displays its sign written in N'ko. Photographs, D.White Oyler, date, July 30, 2000.



Top left: Members at the ICRA-N'KO headquarters in Kerouane, Haute-Guinée, July 29, 2000.

Top right and above: Students attending N'ko classes in the Gbessia quartier in Conakry, July 18, 1993. Photographs, D. White Oyler.

Right: The building that housed Souleymane Kanté's first school for N'ko, Bingerville, Côte d'Ivoire. Below: Present-day N'ko association members standing in the entryway of the first N'ko school in Bingerville, Côte d'Ivoire. Photographs by D. White Oyler, date, August 10, 1994.



linguistic community whose unity is becoming increasingly based upon a common writing system that is accessible to all speakers of Mande languages. According to Liliana R. Goldin,

Transnational identities are characterized by complex political, social, and psychological features, as individuals re-evaluate their positions from within and consider their place in the new and extended social networks. In the definition of identities, individuals experience displacement, relocation, and redefinition of self and community as they confront the necessity of classifying the world around them. [Therefore,] Processes of displacement, exile, and settlement occur at psychological, cultural, and social levels and these can operate at 'home' as well as 'abroad.'²⁵

With regard to the dissemination of N'ko, such informal association developed as a result of Kanté's advice that each learner of N'ko teach his family plus seven others has turned into more formal associations such as Union Manden and ICRA-N'KO whose membership has grown exponentially since their establishment in 1986.

During the early period (1949–1959) of its dissemination along the trade routes, schools were established Côte d'Ivoire's city of Abidjan, where Kanté himself taught from 1949–1959. In Mali N'ko was taught in Bamako and its environs.^{26,27} While there are no direct reports of schools in Burkina Faso and Senegal during this period, several Burkinabés and Senegalese had learned N'ko at Kanté's own school in Côte d'Ivoire.²⁸ In Liberia and Sierra Leone people were also learning N'ko at this time.^{29,30}

The period of Individual Initiative (1959–1986) is responsible for the second stage of the alphabet's dissemination. People moved freely along the diaspora's trade routes and taught N'ko to others in West Africa. Although it is impossible to estimate the number of people that have learned N'ko, one teacher could exert different levels of influence, depending upon the length of time he spent with the illiterate population. For one, he could simply sensitize people to N'ko by only introducing the alphabet and explain his own understanding of the motives and intentions of its author, or else he could initiate the teaching of N'ko and provide contacts within the networks of those who were already literate in N'ko such as other traders traveling from market to market because often town residents acquired news while shopping there. Folks sensitized by this minimal contact, might have chosen to learn the alphabet only sporadically when they came into contact with another N'ko literate. At times an N'ko teacher might so pique the interest of townsfolk that they would pay to have him stay there and teach N'ko. Sometimes students would copy each other's manuscripts and share addresses or gen-

erate correspondence with Kanté himself or other N'ko teachers. One individual informant involved in the dissemination process had made various contacts and did possess information on the status of N'ko in far distant places.³¹ He shared that he had learned N'ko in Kissidougou, Haute-Guinée and taught it in the Baté at Koumban and Kankan and in Haute-Guinée at Faranah, and also in Mali in the Cercles of Kaaba and Sibi. This informant also testified to the existence of N'ko associations in Côte d'Ivoire, Libya, and Saudi Arabia. Although one cannot document the number of contacts this informant had made or certify the number of his students, or guess the number of teachers who evolved from his teachings, or else even verify the accuracy of his account, it is safe to assume that he spread the seeds of N'ko over a large geographical portion of the diaspora.

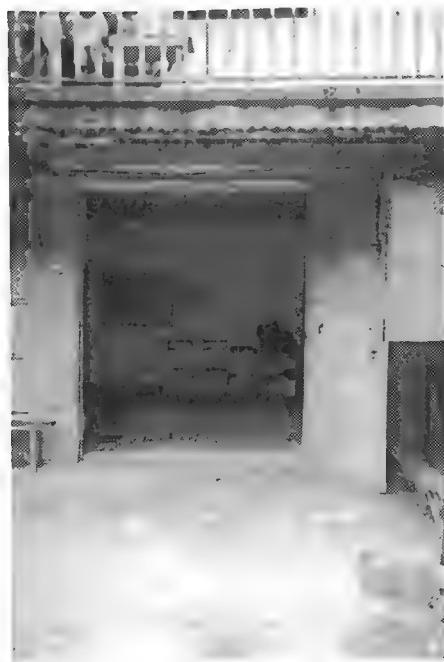
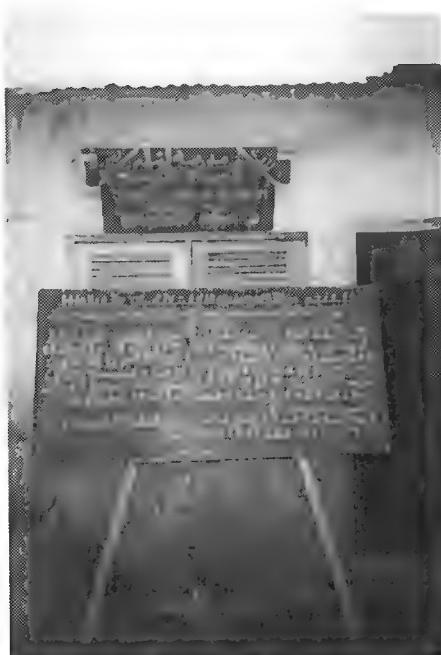
While the Individual Initiative period helped to disseminate N'ko, ICRA–N'KO (1986 to the present) has launched a coordinated effort at the local, national, and international levels. Under the auspices of Guinea's Ministries of Foreign Affairs and National Education, ICRA–N'KO contacted each embassy and each Ministry of Education in countries where large numbers of Mande speakers live, and the countries have so far accepted ICRA–N'KO's promotion of the N'ko alphabet within their borders.³² ICRA–N'KO organizations have flourished. For example the Bamako ICRA–N'KO association estimates that as of 1991 over 4,000 people were able to read and write N'ko within the city. At the forty-fourth anniversary of the founding of N'ko (1993), Mali's celebration was attended by eight government ministers.³³ Furthermore, the ICRA–N'KO association of Côte d'Ivoire pecuniarily supports N'ko schools in Abidjan. The president of the association in 1993 in Côte d'Ivoire was none other than the nephew of the executive branch president of Guinea's ICRA–N'KO (1990–1994).³⁴ In 1993 the president of Guinea's ICRA–N'KO reported that he oversaw branches in West Africa, including those in Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Gambia, Ghana, Togo, and Burkina Faso.^{35,36} The only branch that has deteriorated is the one in Liberia, because of its civil war that lasted from 1989–1997.³⁷ There are ICRA–N'KO associations in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.³⁸ The branch in Egypt has a school and has taken on the task of duplicating manuscripts and printing texts out of Cairo.³⁹ This branch asked each N'ko local organization to collect money in order to buy a computer and to create software with which to produce books more efficiently.⁴⁰ N'ko was introduced into Saudi Arabia by people who made the pilgrimage to Mecca, and for Mali it is said that Mande speakers in official positions, such as Mali's ambassador to Saudi Arabia in the mid-1990s, Sidi Mohamed Youssouf Djere, were proselytes of N'ko.^{41,42} In 2001 speakers established websites for N'ko

in Egypt at <www.kanjamadi.com> and in the United States at <www.fakoli.com>. N'ko became a course of study at Cairo University in 2003.

N'ko in West Africa

N'ko is taught in schools across West Africa.⁴³ In Bamako, Mali the Institut Islamique Djoliba, a *médersa*, has had N'ko as a part of the curriculum since the late 1980s.⁴⁴ Schools in the Abobo, Treicheville, and Koumassi Quarters of Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, teach the alphabet to adults and children together side by side.⁴⁵ The *Imam* at the Central Mosque in Monrovia, Liberia, supported a school from 1987 until its civil war (1989–1997) drove him to seek refuge with family members in Kankan.⁴⁶ N'ko was taught there every day between the 4 p.m. and 6 p.m. prayers to 57 people. Liberia had another school at the mosque in West Point and in Kakata, Vayinka, Bonin, and Kaniyaka schools where N'ko was taught. Many Liberian teachers have relocated to Abidjan where they are currently teaching.⁴⁷ Informants reported seeing schools from Senegal to Nigeria; Malian, Ivoirian, Gambian, Senegalese, Burkinabé, and Sierra Leonian students were observed studying N'ko with Souleymane Kanté at Missira [sic].⁴⁸ The school in Lagos, Nigeria, is reported to have been begun in the 1960s for Mande speakers in the Lagos market.⁴⁹

While ICRA–N'KO has attempted to establish branches in each of Guinea's prefectures, the most reliable information concerning the spread of N'ko comes from informants from Kankan and the Baté who have disseminated the alphabet to varying degrees throughout the region of Haute-Guinée. Compound schools and formal schools can be verified by visiting their sites. Informants have identified the existence of schools along forest trade routes that traverse the Guinea Forestière region. The existence of these schools can be documented by visitation or through witnessing N'ko's usage in the marketplace. Although these informants have been fairly accurate in their assessment of the distribution of N'ko close to home, they have also provided information on N'ko as far away as to Cairo and Mecca, but these schools can not be so easily verified. I visited schools in Bamako, Mali, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, Cairo, Egypt, and have first-hand information from exiles from Liberia and Sierra Leone who informed me about schools in their districts. It is evident that N'ko's dissemination has brought about uniformity of knowledge and technology to speakers of Mande languages. More importantly, it has provided a spirit of cultural nationalism keyed on language, literacy, and a heroic and historic past. Thus cultural similarities have welded the speak-



Above left: Signage at entryway of an N'ko school in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, August 15, 1994. Above right: A classroom at the N'ko school in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, same date as above. Below: N'ko students in Cairo pictured with participants in the Conference on Language and Culture in Africa, Cairo University, October 2001 (includes author in the last row). Abidjan photos by D. White Oyler, conference photo, taken November 1, 2001, by Arnold Odio.



ers of Mande languages into a community that defines itself as a transnational ethnic group.

Souleymane Kanté's literacy campaign as a Pan African movement

Souleymane Kanté lived during an exciting age of cultural nationalism that was translated into a global movement of Pan Africanism. There is considerable literature concerning the political aspects of this movement and the roles of historic figures such as Edward Wilmot Blyden, W. E. B. Dubois, and Marcus Garvey. The cultural movement, Négritude, also has an extensive literature on the writings of its proponents such as Aimée Césaire, Léopold Senghor, and Léon Damas. In light of this study, it is necessary to consider Souleymane Kanté as having made a contribution to both the cultural and political movement on the continent of Africa. This chapter establishes the historical context of the Pan African movement defining terms and identifying actors and their roles. It then establishes Kanté's contribution to the movement and compares his ideas to those of his contemporaries. Finally the chapter illustrates the pan African nature of the N'ko literacy campaign by tracing the international nature of the expansion of N'ko literacy as it leaves the cradle of Kankan and grows among the speakers of Mande languages living in a West African diaspora.

Souleymane Kanté's Pan Africanism as a cultural and political movement

Often in this text I have used the word *diaspora*, a term that derives from the Greek Word *dispersion* [*dia*, apart and *speirein*, to scatter]. One finds its roots in the Old Testament where it refers to the Jews living dispersed among the Gentiles during the period of Babylonian captivity. In a broader sense the term today refers to the scattering of any originally homogeneous people.

One of the theses of this book is that the speakers of Mande languages who have been dispersed throughout West Africa have turned their geographical displacement to a considerable extent into an achievement, which has already been characterized in a previous chapter as a period of enlightenment. Their intercultural placement has allowed them to undertake the negotiations and compromises which bind people to a culture rather than to a country. This claim is made based on the assumption that what happened to the Mande rests on a special type of historical elision that overlooks geographical discontinuity. The ur-pattern can be found in the period of Babylonian Captivity in which the Israelites were moved from their homeland to Babylon by the Chaldeans.

When events like these occur to a culturally homogenous people, their awareness of the displacement, whether cultural or political, often makes them search for “rootedness”—that is to say, to the establishment of a new relationship between person and place. I suggest that since Souleymane Kanté’s invention of *N’ko* on that mythical date of April 14, 1949, the Mande destitution from place occasioned by the diaspora has given way to a re-institution of a Mande identity based on the “rootedness” of those who say *N’ko*. For many years there has been a cultural grassroots movement based on language and literacy for those who say *N’ko*.

Additionally, the year 1949 should also be considered a seminal one for those interested in determining the genesis of certain concepts associated with Pan Africanism, and, more specifically, with one idea first suggested by Obi Wali at the Makerere Conference of 1962 which later seems to have affected Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s philosophical position on African languages. This idea, a complex one for each individual writer, offers that “... the whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium for educated African writing is misdirected, and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture.”⁵⁰ Souleymane Kanté seems to be the first one to articulate this sentiment, and certainly the first to do anything about it.

Souleymane Kanté’s cultural nationalism paralleled two larger Pan African political movements. One was of a political nature concerned with the unification of people of African descent in a global diaspora focusing on the Atlantic basin and the other one was on the African continent focusing on the nationalism that generated independent African states. Both offered the perspective of a common cultural nature, inclusive to the Négritude movement and the Harlem Renaissance with their trans-Atlantic cultural nationalism created by the African diaspora.

Pan Africanism, according to critics, has a cultural and political dimension. Its focus is often on ancestral ties that bind people of African descent all over the world. In Hegelian terminology their synthesis would occur in the future. Pan Africanism transcends boundaries of geography and time. Based on a heroic and historic past and a common culture out of Mother Africa, people of the continent and the diaspora perceive themselves to be a cultural nation. There is pride in one’s Africaness which overcomes geographical barriers.

Critics define Pan Africanism as “Africa as the homeland of Africans and persons of African extraction, solidarity among men of African blood, belief in a distinct African personality, rehabilitation of Africa’s past, pride in African culture, Africa for Africans in church and state, and the hope for a untied and glorious future Africa.”⁵¹ What confers universality to the political Pan African movement is its collective imagination which

casts its members as a transnational community united as a result of their cultural attachment to Mother Africa.⁵² The genesis of the concept of *Pan Africanism* can be traced to the year 1893 when the term *Pan Africanism* is first used to describe the cultural and political phenomenon occurring at the Pan African Congress in Chicago where people of African descent organized themselves as a lobby for the specific purpose of exerting pressure on the colonizing nations for African independence. Later, Pan Africanism is also used to describe what became known as the first Pan African Congress held in 1900 and convened in London by the Trinidadian Sylvester Williams.

Pan African movements at a continental scale began to take shape politically under the tutelage of such farsighted individuals as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana who in 1957 proposed unification of the independent African states as the United States of Africa; by W. E. B. Dubois, an educator from the United States, who contributes to the idea of Pan Africanism by organizing an international Pan African Conferences whose purpose was to promote the ideal that all Africans are brothers, and that all, therefore, must assert their independence; by Marcus Garvey a Jamaican who attempted a Back-to-Africa movement which failed in the 1920s, but Garvey's publication the *Negro World* did succeed in promoting Pan African sentiments throughout the world. It was distributed through his Black Star Shipping Line.

On another front, leaders of the *Négritude* movement—Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal, Aimée Césaire of Martinique, and Leon Damas of French Guyana—began to promote African cultural nationalism in the Atlantic basin through their literary movement. Another aspect of pan Africanism was promulgated through individual initiative.⁵³ However, all these were regional movements and, therefore, limited in scope; nevertheless, they were perhaps more effective than the treatises of intellectuals and politicians because they were in fact grassroots movements by masses of people. As a literacy movement, one can view N'ko as having a pan African dimension because it has reached a vast number of people, thus generating a groundswell of support for an indigenous African cultural identity that transcends international borders.

The intellectual genesis of the political Pan African movement is found in the nineteenth century with the writings of Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832–1912) whose birth was in St. Thomas in what at that time was the Danish West Indies, but Blyden spent much of his professional life in Liberia. Blyden believed that people of African descent could never become first-class citizens in the “white world” of the Americas and that to gain respect and acceptance, they needed to establish unity through the creation of an African nation which conferred an African nationality.

Pursuing his dreams, Blyden promoted the establishment of African universities and African leadership, but he also sought to create a Christian world led by Christian churches established on the continent—that is, African Independent Churches. Once in West Africa, Blyden encouraged people to follow his concept of Pan Africanism, hoping for a larger number of returnees who would then contribute their expertise to local development. He urged cooperation among different African ethnic groups or cultural interest groups in order to shore up the erosion of African culture which had been losing ground to Europe's cultural imperialism. During Blyden's lifetime, however, cooperation among Christians and Muslims failed because of each sect's religious exclusivity. At his funeral, however, both groups participated and cooperated in honoring him both as an intellectual and as a nationalist. By 1900 Blyden became recognized as a consummate African nationalist precisely because of his strong emphasis on the value of indigenous culture.⁵⁴ Because Blyden predated Kanté, it is more than likely possible that Kanté came across his early nationalistic writings in the 1940s at the time when Kanté studied the English language and culture. It is nearly impossible, however, to establish the matter of direct influence because Kanté himself does not address the topic in his writings or seems to have discussed it with family or friends. Informants offer no such knowledge. Nevertheless, the possibility remains. Evidence does show that Kanté read widely and was an eclectic reader. Working on the assumption that Kanté had read Blyden's early cultural conceptualization of African universities and resistance to European cultural imperialism, it is no mental stretch to link Kanté's views about the development and promotion of his ideas on maternal-language learning to Blyden's. Kanté's pre-occupation with the translation and transcription of scholarly, scientific, and technological works into the N'ko alphabet has the force resonating with Blyden's ideas. It is also easy, however, to perceive Kanté as an original thinker himself. In either case, one must conclude that Kanté's N'ko is Blyden's Pan African paradigm come to fruition.

While Kanté's literacy movement was cultural, one cannot escape its political dimension; it shares common goals with the continental Pan African movement of Kwame Nkrumah. Nkrumah had been a participant in Pan African conferences, and by the time of the Pan African conference held at Manchester in 1945, Pan Africanism and African nationalism had mutated into a liberation movement. After Ghana's independence in 1957, Nkrumah began campaigning for a United States of Africa. Having studied at Lincoln University, an historically black university in the United States from 1934 to 1942, Nkrumah used his knowledge of the United States Federal system to propose a similar system for

Africa. His proposal would bring together all of the resources of the continent under one government so that together the African nations could achieve greater economic equality with the industrialized nations in the global marketplace. As a result, Nkrumah convened on the continent in Accra in April of 1958 the First Conference of Independent African States; in December of the same year Nkrumah convened a second one—the All-African Peoples Conference. The agenda at these conferences was to create an Africa both independent and united. At the latter one, he uses the term *African Personality*—one that resonates to the term *African Nationality* used by Blyden at his lecture, *Study and Race*, given in Freetown, Sierra Leone in 1893.⁵⁵ The Resolutions of both Conferences supported the evolution of a “Commonwealth of Free African States.” Later, on May 1, 1959, President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and President Sékou Touré of Guinea signed the Conakry Declaration creating a Ghana-Guinea Union that they hoped would become the nucleus of a new united Africa. In 1960 Modibo Keita of Mali joined the Union.⁵⁶ By this time, however, Nkrumah’s concept of a United States of Africa became reduced as a result of a conflict over the degree of continental unification which would be achieved between different continental factions—particularly the Casablanca Group and the Monrovia group.⁵⁷ Therefore, it was from a series of compromises that the Organization of African Unity was born May 25, 1963 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It is because of their commitment to the federation of African nations that both Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Sékou Touré of Guinea receive the eponym of Pan Africanists. By the time of the First Festival of Negro Arts held in Dakar, Senegal, in 1966 the general consensus among African leaders was that cultural nationalism would become the vehicle of the Pan African movement; the initiative for the movement shifted from the diaspora to the continent.⁵⁸

Souleymane Kanté wrote the poem, titled, *Le Capitaine de l’espérance au bord du vaisseau des élites sur l’océan des lumières*, (*The Captain of Hope on Board the Ship of the Elites on the Ocean of the Enlightenment*) for Ghana’s independence, and he presented it to Nkrumah at the celebration. Kanté and Nkrumah knew the same circle of people, including Sékou Touré. From 1966 until his death in 1972, Nkrumah stayed in Conakry, Guinea, as did Kanté during that period. Similarities can be found between Kanté’s cultural literacy movement and Nkrumah’s political one. Nkrumah had the goal of uniting people in a “Commonwealth of African Nations” by binding together geographically economic, political, and cultural areas, and he began by creating a union between Ghana and Guinea. On the other side, Kanté had the goal of unifying Africans culturally through history and language literacy. Kanté had always maintained that his alphabet could be the glue to bind the tonal

languages on the continent because of its unique features. Today Kante's legacy seems the more enduring one. N'ko continues to grow among all speakers of Mande languages. While Nkrumah's political movement has faltered because of the disparate ethnicities of the leaders of Africa's new nations, Kante's N'ko has flourished because of its focus on a homogenous group of Maninka speakers, through whom his ideas have given enlightenment to the rest of the speakers of Mande languages, the children of the diaspora.

One way of gaging the importance of an historical event is to consider its repercussions over time. With regard to a movement's intellectual tapestry, one can look for strands of its ideas reappearing in later periods and other areas. These assertions are based on the premise that movements are part of a world community of ideas and that each manifestation is in essence an international phenomenon subject to autochthonous modifications.

Seen in this light Négritude and the N'ko literacy movement could be perceived as expressions of the type of cultural nationalism which has risen out of the French colonial experience and which champions the equality of African and European cultures. However, although their motivations are kindred, they differ in scope; N'ko's cultural nationalism draws together a more tightly knit group of members from a West African diaspora. Négritude, on the other hand, sought to establish an affinity between Africans on the continent and those elsewhere displaced during the Atlantic-basin diaspora. But both are cultural movements focusing on a specific type of autochthonous literature differing in the language used to communicate their ideas. Négritude writers continued to use the French language of cultural imperialism. N'ko, on the other hand, created its literature in a maternal language using an indigenous writing system.

Aimée Césaire from Martinique coined the term *Négritude* which is used to describe a literary movement originating in Paris in the 1930s. With its focus on a Pan African cultural identity, it is difficult to avoid concluding that the subtext for this movement was a reaction against a type of institutionalized racism found in literature. Having assimilated French culture, "les étudiants noires" from within the French empire itself who had studied in Paris, learned that French literature itself, with its colonial focus and exaltation of the French experience of dominance, had denied an equal place to people of color. In the birthplace of the Enlightenment, African, West Indian, and Middle Eastern students found themselves steeped in historical alienation not only from their homelands, but also estranged from self. One objective of the movement was to define a black aesthetics and a black consciousness.⁵⁹ The movement

was a peaceful backlash against French racism surging from French assimilationist policies dictated by cultural imperialism. Aesthetic reactions range from Camara Laye's novel *Dark Child* (1954) in which he gently asserts the beauty of his cultural background in Kouroussa, Haute-Guinée, to the more political works of Franz Fanon, a supporter of Algerian independence, who advocates rejecting French culture through violent revolution. Senegalese author Léopold Sédar Senghor observes that the movement offers "the awareness, defence, and development of African cultural values;" he, therefore, accepts that the movement is the synthesis of the best in African and French cultures.⁶⁰ Fanon decries Senghor's analysis because it incorporates foreign misconceptions about African identity rather than reconstructs African identity from an indigenous perspective.

While many Francophone writers embraced Négritude, the Anglophone writers of the period were not overtly influenced by the Négritude movement. Anglophone writers underwent a different colonial experience, including the inherent British distrust of anything French. Based upon their differing literary traditions, African writers of English seemed to distrust the vague, romantic nature of Négritude whose focus was a black aesthetic. For one, the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka does promote an understanding of African culture in his works such as *Lion and the Jewel* and *Death and the King's Horseman*; however he has attacked Négritude because of the absurdity of basing a literary movement on skin color: "A tiger does not proclaim his tigritude," claims Soyinka.⁶¹ British African writers also turned their thoughts and writings to indigenous African culture. The Kenyan Jomo Kenyatta, author of *Facing Mt. Kenya*, uses his prose as a justification of the efficacy of Gikuyu culture, and Ephraim Amu of Ghana has collected songs and musical instruments that were set aside in preference of western music and instruments. Amu has used these songs to establish a cultural continuity linking to the musical antecedents of his region. Not unlike these contemporary figures, Souleymane Kanté collected the cultural trappings declining among the speakers of Mande languages.

The black cultural nationalism demonstrated by Négritude had its birth from African-French-speaking black intellectuals who asserted their identity in a colonial language which was often expressed through a passionate and emotive mythification of Old Afrique. Souleymane Kanté's literary accomplishments within Africa can be placed within the furor of such Francophile writers as Aimée Césaire, Léopold Senghor, or else Bernard Dadié because Kanté's imperative matched his contemporaries' focus on the power and aesthetics of indigenous thought. In his language expression and his use of oral literature, however, Kanté is unparalleled

because he writes in Maninka, thereby becoming the precursor of later writers who have considered literature written by Africans in a western language as the act of impoverishing their mother tongue. More importantly, he invented an alphabet designed to transcribed accurately the tonality of his maternal language. Léopold Senghor had categorized Négritude “as a weapon, as an instrument of liberation and as a contribution to the humanism of the twentieth century.”⁶² But the Négritude movement rode the western pony of European literary traditions. The N’ko literacy movement can be considered too a weapon—a weapon against illiteracy, an intellectual liberation for all those masses who have had no access to knowledge because they exist in a world whose writing system still wears the traditions and aesthetic trappings of western culture.

Kanté’s N’ko gives expression to the idea of acquiring and controlling knowledge through one’s own language; literacy is better served through a system of writing whose knowledge is anchored in one’s own maternal language. He believed N’ko would help Mande speakers focus on a shared culture, thereby creating coherence of ideas. Mande civilization would be restored to its earlier preeminence within West Africa, and through universal literacy in N’ko, the Mande would never again be marginalized by foreign interests.

However, Kanté also urged the Mande to study beyond N’ko literacy. In learning Arabic script and the Roman and N’ko alphabets, the readers would be assured of a better understanding of other cultures, particularly Arabic. Not only would they become better Muslims in this manner, but also they would achieve access to the West’s modern technological and scientific information. Emphatically believing that one’s own language in its written form offered the best vehicle for learning, Kanté did not discourage the learning of other ones.

Kanté’s greatest intellectual contributions to Mande culture were translations and transcriptions of information which would serve as a repository of the intellectual history of his people inclusive of their religion, literature, foreign science and technology, and his compilation of healing arts. His N’ko script would be the backbone of a body of knowledge which he hoped would usher in a period of enlightenment of Mande culture.

Souleymane Kanté’s compendium of literature included several genres both indigenous and foreign. Working alone as do translators, his life-long passion became the production of monographs in his N’ko alphabet which would enlighten his people. He first translated and reproduced tirelessly religious texts and later added all sorts of works from history, sociology, linguistics, literature, philosophy, science and technology. He

then became involved in their promotion by creating the means for accessing N'ko, such as textbooks for teaching the writing system and dictionaries for understanding it. Furthermore, he added to this body of knowledge monographs of indigenous history that included transcriptions from the oral traditions of the *jeliw*. While the Négritude movement created a place for African culture in a foreign language to Africa, Souleymane Kanté's movement has supplied the spirit of place. There is an aphorism in Italian which says, *tradutore traditore* (translator traitor). Ironically, Négritude used the wrong, cold language of the conquerors to promote African culture, and although Négritude added vocabulary words to French, it also used a conqueror's words to say what was already aesthetically evident in Mande to its speakers. Kanté, on the other hand, sought to tie meaning to one's maternal culture, thus empowering Mande rather than impoverishing it, as Ngugi wa Thiong'o might say.

Kanté as a pan Africanist

Souleymane Kanté's ideas about language also anticipate those of Liberian Bai Tamia Moore (1920–1988) and Kenyan, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1938–) who shifted in their later writings to their indigenous languages of Vai and Kikuyu, respectively. Bai Tamia Moore offers versions of his poems in both Vai and Gola languages *en face* with his English in bilingual publications as early as 1962. Like Kanté, Moore became an “interpreter, translator, and intermediary between people and culture.”⁶³ He wrote for a Vai speaking and Vai reading audience in Vai, alongside his English versions. When Moore wrote in Gola, however, he did not always translate his words into English because he believed “Gola thinking” could not necessarily be translated.⁶⁴ Moore's thinking, in this case, parallels Kanté's who believed that Mande thought could not be fully expressed by foreign languages.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's aesthetic sensibility about maternal languages became a political stance later in his life “The bullet was the means of physical subjugation. Language was the means of spiritual subjugation,” Ngugi observed.⁶⁵ Ngugi's ideas showed an affinity to Kanté's with regard to the role of language in cultural socialization under European cultural imperialism. Moore, on the other hand, did not seem to share this same view because Liberia had been independent since 1847; nevertheless, Moore's experiences were comparable to those of Kanté and Ngugi, in that repatriated people of African descent, the Americo-Liberians, who had colonized present day Liberia and exclusively ruled the nation from the 1820s until 1980, imposed the American English language culture on indigenous groups.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o addressed the dual role of language in communication and cultural transmission. In his discussion he perceived language as a weapon for the destruction of indigenous culture, a type of cultural imperialism imposed through a foreign language's ability of imparting a foreign culture at the same time the language is learned. Second language learners benefit from an ampler perspective of two cultures, but they also become the unwitting recipients of cultural indoctrination. Kanté would have concurred with the idea that learning in the foreign language does place the learner at a disadvantage initially because the cultural baggage is different. Colonial education in Kanté's time was available only to a privileged few, and only a small percentage of students usually completed that education. It is a fact that most of the indigenous people were thus placed at a disadvantage because they were unable to compete in the spheres of business and government mainly because Europeans kept alive a monopoly of oppression by restricting literacy.

Ngugi turned to writing in Gikuyu in 1977, and by 1986 he made a formal commitment to write in his maternal language rather than in English; he depended on translations from then on. Some African writers of English felt that Ngugi committed professional suicide because he chose not to write in English. English, after all, is the language of an elite which exists across the continent and the world. However, according to Ngugi, the numbers of his English speaking readers were small in comparison to his indigenous language readership. He raised the question as to who should be a writer's audience—one that is already literate in English or French, or else his own countrymen who have been shut out of the educational system for whatever reason. During Kenya's colonial period, the British decided who was worthy of receiving an education. Those who were brought into the colonial education system, according to Ngugi, learned at a disadvantage because they were not literate in their maternal language; few of the students who entered the program were able to complete it. Ngugi's intellectual stance is one of egalitarian inclusion. He directed his ability toward writing a type of drama that is performed in the local language, thus energizing an indigenous dramatic format—a "People's Theater" in which all folks can participate and from which they can benefit. In his play *Mother, Sing for Me* (1981), he addressed the issue of land ownership in a didactic manner, and his art served the people by enabling those who were not literate enough to understand western style codices to know their rights according to the law. He used Gikuyu to politically mobilize Kenya's five million indigenous language speakers.⁶⁶ For Ngugi, "culture is solidarity that is forged in and through political struggle."⁶⁷

Kanté and Ngugi were contemporaries; however, Kanté's ideas pre-dated Ngugi's in his focus of using indigenous language education as the salient cultural tool. Using N'ko as the means to fully discuss in writing all aspects of culture and technology, Kanté believed, allowed for full participation of the Mande in the modern world. The processes used by both men are an attempt to give voice to those people in society who had been denied access to power. Their weapon of choice, maternal languages, can be seen as a step in the liberating process of having access through knowledge. Within the parameters established by one's own culture, however, neither one claims that writing in the maternal language alone will accomplish decolonization, except only decolonising the mind, as Ngugi observed in his perceptive text.⁶⁸

One major difference is that Moore and Ngugi use the Roman alphabet, while Souleymane Kanté created his own alphabet. Kanté's task seems a much more difficult one. It was to develop graphemes that would truly represent the language spoken by the speakers of Mande languages. Ngugi's Gikuyu is a clicking language; its clicks being oddly and often faultily represented whenever it is written using English graphemes. Bai T. Moore became convinced of the inadequacy of writing in his mother's Gola language using English graphemes. With his father's Vai, he had no such problem because Bukele had devised an autochthonous syllabary for that language as early as 1822. Moore took advantage of this by writing poems in Vai. I witnessed that in Liberia in 1987, when I had the opportunity to meet him and discuss the Vai syllabary.⁶⁹

Notes

¹ Group interview 17, April 5, 1993, in Balandou; and group interview 18, April 5, 1993, in Balandou.

² Group interview 36, May 13, 1993, in Bankalan.

³ Group interview 17, April 5, 1993, in Balandou; and interview 69, July 18, 1993, in Conakry.

⁴ Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan.

⁵ Interview 21, April 8, 1993, in Kankan.

⁶ Group interview 41, May 12, 1993, in Gbeleman.

⁷ The informant stated that he learned N'ko in Kissidougou and then taught it in Faranah. Interview 21, April 8, 1993, in Kankan.

⁸ In interview 21, April 8, 1993, in Kankan, the informant related that he taught as many as eighty students in the 1960s, both adults and children. In interview 45, June 17, 1993, in Kankan, the informant says that she taught N'ko here to nine women ages 25–43 and eight men.

⁹ The informant stated that he learned N'ko from Taliby Kaba the younger in Macenta, in the mid-1950s. Interview 22, April 9, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁰ Group interview 67, July 17, 1993, in Conakry.

¹¹ Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan.

¹² In group interview 41, May 12, 1993, in Gbeleman, one informant stated that he taught N'ko in N'Zérékoré and that the master teacher at the school was Boubacar Keita.

¹³ Interview 49, June 20, 1993, in Kankan; interview 29, May 3, 1993, in Kankan; group interview 45, June 17, 1993, in Kankan; and interview 70, July 18, 1993, in Conakry.

¹⁴ Interview 29, May 3, 1993, in Kankan; and interview 49, June 20, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁵ Interview 25, April 13, 1993 in Karifamoriah. (See photo p. 119)

¹⁶ Interview 37, May 13, 1993, in Bankalan.

¹⁷ Group interview 36, May 12, 1993, in Bankalan; in interview 38, May 13, 1993, in Bankalan, the informant stated that he was the patron of the school and paid its out of pocket expenses for kerosene for the lanterns.

¹⁸ Group interview 41, May 12, 1993, in Gbeleman.

¹⁹ Group interview 41, May 12, 1993, in Gbeleman.

²⁰ The Gbeleman informants stated that the students contribute to the teacher's income by supplying labor for a wheat and a groundnut field and by bringing him a bundle of firewood per week. Group interview 41, May 12, 1993, in Gbeleman. Interview 56, June 24, 1993, in Kankan, the informant, and also one patron for the Timbo quartier school, states that he paid the teacher in Gbeleman 40,000 GNF per month to teach N'ko.

²¹ Interview 68, July 17, 1993, in Conakry.

²² In group interview 67, July 18, 1993, in Conakry, one informant was from the Macenta branch of ICRA-N'KO. Also present was a representative from the N'Zérékoré branch of ICRA-N'KO. In group interview 24, April 12, 1993, and interview 29, May 3, 1993, in Kankan, both informants confirm N'ko education in N'Zérékoré. The informant in interview 24 added that when he was in Guékédou, he joined the fifteen people, young and old studying N'ko who were traders, sellers of auto parts, tailors, masons, and woodcutters. Informant in interview 29 confirmed seeing N'ko taught in Guékédou.

²³ The informant told me that she was the teacher at this school and invited me to visit classes and interview her students. Interview 63, July 14, 1993, in Conakry. In interview 65, July 15, 1993, in Conakry, the female student explained that she packed up her business early each day at the Madina Market to come to classes at this school.

²⁴ Interview 70, July 18, 1993, in Conakry. In interview 71, July 18, 1993, in Conakry, I went to the school at the Matoto Market and spoke with both N'ko teachers and students.

²⁵ Liliana R. Goldin, "Transnational Identities: the Search for Analytic Tools," in Liliana R. Goldin (editor) *Identities on the Move: Transnational Processes in North America and the Caribbean Basin*, Studies on Culture and Society Volume 7, Albany, NY: Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, University at Albany, 1999, pp. 1–2.

²⁶ The informant said that he saw Malians learning N'ko in Abidjan. Interview 19, April 6, 1993, in Kankan.

²⁷ The informant said that he taught N'ko at the village of Kingnègne in the Cercle de Kaaba (but never in the village of Kaaba itself) and at the village of Kingnedöba in the Cercle of Sibi. Interview 21, April 8, 1993, in Kankan.

²⁸ The informant witnessed people from these countries learning the alphabet in interview 19, April 6, 1993, in Kankan.

²⁹ One informant who had been the *imam* at the Grand Mosque in Monrovia, told me that he was teaching N'ko there when I was in Monrovia in 1987. Group interview 33, May 8, 1993, in Kankan; and interview 50, June 21, 1993, in Kankan.

³⁰ Interview 32, May 8, 1993, in Kankan.

³¹ Interview 21, April 8, 1993, in Kankan.

³² Interview 68, July 17, 1993, in Conakry.

³³ Interview 68, July 17, 1993, in Conakry.

³⁴ Interview 84, August 15, 1994, in Abidjan.

³⁵ ICRA-N'KO asserts that there are also branches in non-Mande-speaking areas of Africa such as the Congo, Zaire (Congo), Gabon, and Zambia. Press release to the Agence Guinéenne de Presse, No. 1934, p. 6; and in the minutes of the official meeting with me the ICRA-N'KO executive board stated that N'ko was used in Zaire (Congo), Gabon, the Congo, Kenya, and Tanzania. "Rencontre du Bureau Executif ICRA-N'KO avec Madame Dianne White Oyler de L'Université de Floride des Etats-Unis, Saturday, October 10, 1992, in Conakry," p.3.

³⁶ The president of ICRA-N'KO listed Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, the Gambia, and Burkina Faso in interview 68, July 17, 1003, in Conakry; in press release to Agence Guinéenne de Presse, No. 1934, all of the above were listed and Ghana was added, p. 6; in the minutes of the official meeting with me the ICRA-N'ko executive board also mentioned Togo, "Rencontre du Bureau Executif ICRA-N'KO," p. 3.

³⁷ Group interview 33, May 11, 1993, in Kankan; and interview 50, June 21, 1993, in Kankan.

³⁸ In group interview 08, March 8, 1993, in Karifamoriah, the informants indicated that merchants and students brought the N'ko alphabet and the ICRA-N'KO organization to Egypt; in group interview 46, June 19, 1993, in Kankan, one informant, who went to the Al-Azh'ar University in Cairo, stated that he carried the alphabet to Cairo in 1962. It would stand to reason that N'ko literate Mande-speaking pilgrims brought N'ko and ICRA-N'KO to Mecca. In the official press release to Agence Guinéenne de Presse, No. 1934, p 6; and in the official meeting with me, the executive board stated that they had branches in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. "Rencontre du bureau Executif ICRA-N'KO," p. 3.

³⁹ Interview 22, April 9, 1993, in Kankan, and interview 49, June 20, 1993, in Kankan. In interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan, the informant reported that Baba Diané was also a member of the Cairo branch. In interview 82, August 10, 1994, in Conakry, the informant spoke about introducing N'ko into Cairo when he was there in 1955.

⁴⁰ Interview 22, April 9, 1993, in Kankan.

⁴¹ Mande speakers from West Africa perform the Hajj each year. Although there are no records to support the claim of Mande speakers literate in N'ko residing in Mecca, it would be reasonable to assume that agents from Guinea's Mande-speaking community or from the Mande-speaking Kabiné Diané Agency for pilgrimages have representatives in Mecca that may also be conversant with N'ko.

⁴² Interview 69, July 18, 1993, in Conakry; and interview 21, April 8, 1993, in Kankan.

⁴³ I have spoken with members of ICRA-N'KO from Guinea, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, and Sierra Leone.

⁴⁴ The school principal and teachers discussed N'ko education at the school. Interview 30, May 4, 1993, in Bamako, Mali.

⁴⁵ School visits and discussions with students August 14–15, 1994, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.

⁴⁶ The informant who had been the *imam* at the Central Mosque at Monrovia had also been the principal of the school in which informant 22 was a teacher and informant 50 was a student. Group interview 33, May 8, 1993, in Kankan.

⁴⁷ Group interview 33, May 8, 1993, in Kankan.

⁴⁸ Missira is the name of a two *quartiers* (Missira I & II) in Kankan. However, since the informant spent most of his life in Liberia, it would make more sense for the informant to have seen these students studying

at Misila, a small township in the Gawula chiefdom of Cape Mount County, Liberia. Interview 33, May 8, 1993, in Kankan.

⁴⁹ Both informants described how members of their families set up schools in Lagos. Group interview 84, August 15, 1994, in Abidjan.

⁵⁰ Obiajunwa Wali, "The Dead End of African Literature?" *Transition*, Volume 4, Number 10, September 10, 1963:14.

⁵¹ P. Olisanwuche Esedebe, "Pan-Africanism": Origins and Meaning," *Tarikh: Pan-Africanism*, Vol. 6, No.3, A.I. Asiwaju and Michael Crowder (eds) P. Olisanwuche Esedebe as Guest Editor (London: Historical Society of Nigeria), 1980, p. 14.

⁵² St. Clair Drake, "Diaspora Studies and Pan-Africanism," in *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*, Joseph E. Harris, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1982, p.343.

⁵³ St. Clair Drake (pp. 353–359) discusses pan-Africanism with a "small p" as those actions of the previous century taken by individuals like Paul Cuffee who transported free African Americans back to Africa. These are individuals and groups who protected and promoted the memory of African origins and the African American churches who sent missionaries to Africa..

⁵⁴ Hollis R. Lynch, *Edward Wilmot Blyden: Pan-Negro Patriot*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 210–247.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁵⁶ Adekunle Ajala, "The Rising Tide of Pan Africanism, 1924–1963," *Tarikh: Pan-Africanism*, Vol. 6, No.3, A.I. Asiwaju and Michael Crowder (eds) P. Olisanwuche Esedebe as Guest Editor (London: Historical Society of Nigeria), 1980, pp. 41–44.

⁵⁷ P. Olisanwuche Esedebe, *Pan-Africanism: The Idea and Movement, 1776–1991*, (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1994) pp. 165–187.

⁵⁸ St. Clair Drake, p. 351.

⁵⁹ Elimimian, Isaac I. "Negritude & African Poetry," in *Critical Theory & African Literature Today* edited by Eldred Durosimi Jones, Eustace Palmer, & Marjorie Jones, (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 1994), p. 22.

⁶⁰ Elimimian, p. 24.

⁶¹ Elimimian, p. 24.

⁶² Léopold Sédar Senghor, "Négritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century," in *Perspectives on Africa: A Reader in Culture, History, and Representation*, (New York: Blackwell, 19) p. 629.

⁶³ Dorith Ofri-Scheps, "Bai T. Moore's Poetry and Liberian Identity," *Liberian Studies Journal*, Volume XV, 2, 1990, p. 54.

⁶⁴ Ofri-Scheps, pp. 53–54.

⁶⁵ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, (London: James Currey, 1986), p. 9.

⁶⁶ Modhumita Roy, "Writers and Politics/Writers in Politics: Ngugi and the Language Question," in *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Texts and Contexts* edited by Charles Cantalupo (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1995), p. 178.

⁶⁷ Roy, p. 180.

⁶⁸ For Ngugi, Roy, p. 179.

⁶⁹ Dianne [White] Oyler and Arnold Odio, "Landsman: The Conversations of Bai T. Moore," *Liberian Studies Journal*, XV, 2, (1990).

Chapter 6

Conclusion

While documenting the process of decolonization in Africa has been an elusive task for researchers, it is possible to identify and define specific subsumed forces acting against assimilation. The Mande speakers of West Africa are attempting to reinvent their indigenous cultural identity in the modern era by supplying to a group of African languages the written word. They have focused upon their heroic and historic past and their cultural similarities, and with Kanté's N'ko they have unleashed a slow but effective grassroots movement antithetical to the Roman alphabet. The major weapon in this assault on the colonials' graphemes is the acquisition of literacy in an indigenous African language and African script. This is a noteworthy development for it provides speakers of Mande languages with the ability to access and possess the knowledge of the ancient and modern worlds that will hopefully enable them to assume the role of equality in the economy and in governance and to use the cultural sphere to recast themselves in terms of African authenticity. Rather than domesticating a European language, as Achebe has proposed, the Mande are adding their own thread to the world's tapestry of written languages, thereby enriching us all. Too many languages have been lost to the world in the modern era, and when the last speaker of a language dies, so does the culture.

In an earlier time in their history, Mande speakers had controlled knowledge through their own language, but over time they lost that control. First, many Mande speakers became Muslims thereby deferring control over religious knowledge to other Mande speakers who became proficient in the Arabic language and literate in Arabic script. Change began when Mande-speaking Muslims conquered their non-Muslim brethren and introduced Islamic paradigms about political governance. Second, the Mande speakers were marginalized by the Europeans who not only sequestered them from access to knowledge but also relieved them of control over their own affairs in matters of politics and economics. Some Mande speakers covertly resisted this intellectual and cultural subordination which restricted through foreign languages their access to knowledge.

Toward the end of the colonial period, Guinea was characterized by an intense politicization at the local, regional, and national levels. From the 1940s to the 1960s Guinea witnessed political and cultural reforms whose result became the Socialist Cultural Revolution of 1968. These reforms reshaped the attitudes of the Mande speakers in Haute-Guinée

to the point that local organizations, such as *Union Manden*, were rekindled, and Mande cultural nationalism circled back to the heroic and historic past. Sékou Touré's National Language Program did reestablish a pride in the Maninka language, one of the four relatively, mutually intelligible Mande languages.

Tradition has it that Souleymane Kanté invented N'ko as a defiance against the intellectual and cultural denigration of Africans by Europeans. Acknowledging the need of his people to achieve control over knowledge through literacy in their maternal language that would rival the Europeans, Kanté promoted his alphabet as a means of reclaiming control over knowledge. He believed that control over knowledge should extend well beyond the transcription of Mande's own languages, history, literature, and customs. As a result, he added to the pool of knowledge by translating Arabic religious texts as well as modern works of science and technology. He wished to help Mande speakers overcome European domination in all spheres of life. Kanté hoped that N'ko literacy would allow Mande speakers to reclaim their shared cultural coherence, thus restoring Mande civilization to its earlier historical preeminence within West Africa.

Souleymane Kanté invented the N'ko alphabet for the purpose of perfecting the transcription of tonality in Mande languages. Once this was achieved, he felt an obligation to create reading materials for what he hoped would be a vast readership. This action consumed him and became his life's work. Furthermore, he encouraged the Mande to learn the alphabet and to use it for their written communication. Mande speakers who recognized the cultural significance of N'ko have to date disseminated Kanté's N'ko texts by copying them often by hand and have delivered them throughout the Mande diaspora thereby feeding the period of Mande enlightenment.

Ancillary to translation and transcription of the Islamic texts was the unintentional reform of Islam. However, unlike the Protestant Reformation which disseminated bibles in the vernacular rather than in its Latin translation, Kanté's N'ko translations of the Quran became mnemonic aids rather than a substitute for memorizing the Quran and for saying the prayers in Arabic. Although Kanté was not the first Islamic scholar to translate Arabic texts into the Mande vernacular in order to help achieve command of Islam, his work is the only one to have served as the basis for a literacy-based, grassroots movement. His goal, one must add, was to improve religious understanding and not to change Islamic catechism through a reform movement.

Many Mande speakers have accepted N'ko and have used it as a hedge against deculturation. David Laitin explains that individuals will subvert official language policy if they see a language of wider

communication as being more appropriate to their needs.¹ Under the period of colonial domination by the French, the French language immediately began impoverishing Mande languages and culture by making French the official language of states under their control. It became the language used for administration, economics, formal education, and politics. Many Mande speakers rejected the supremacy of the French language by refusing to be indoctrinated; they resisted by refusing to send their children to French controlled public schools. Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo emphasize that refusal to become literate in a conqueror's language by a subordinate group is an act of resistance because it is refusal to learn the specific cultural codes and competencies of the dominant group.² In Guinea the insensitive colonial laws imposed French education and the use of the French language upon the people. The French carried out a cultural conquest through language and the subsumed groups had to acquiesce.

The acceptance and use of N'ko has been one force acting against assimilation; it is a direct reaction against what has been perceived as attempts at deculturation still continuing after independence. Macedo observes that the colonizers may have been physically removed, but they have remained culturally positioned in the minds of those who have become assimilated.³ European cultures and languages to date have continued their systemic aggression against African cultures and languages, although today there seems to be a greater sensitivity in the western world about the forces of homogenization and differentiation. Guinea's First Republic chose the French language and a disempowering dependence upon French culture to gain access to modern knowledge — ideas, science, and technology. Macedo warns that this is a danger implicit in reproducing foreign values when using a foreign language. He adds that "it is impossible to Africanize through the medium that de-Africanized."⁴ Because French was already "in place" and because it offered an open door to international communication, Guinea's First Republic continued using French as the official language for national level administration, politics, and international economics. As Macedo observes, these languages have international status and guarantee upward mobility.⁵ N'ko then became the counter movement to the government's National Language Program. While the instructional Program was at first accepted because it offered literacy and access to knowledge in the maternal language, it was not able to deliver on its promise to publish academic and popular texts in the maternal language by transcribing them into African languages using the Roman alphabet. Eventually the majority of the population came to see the Program as an attempt by the government to restrict their access to knowledge.

N'ko became a rejection of deculturation; its acceptance was an affirmation of Mande culture. According to Laitin, people in the subordinate group can mobilize to support any kind of movement in the name of language revival.⁶ N'ko, according to informants, aided in the restoration of Mande speakers' self-esteem. The act of reading the maternal language in the Mande-styled script has fostered lasting results in literacy retention because reading is not just decoding language, but it is intertwined with the reader's personal knowledge and his experiences in his world. Mande speakers accepted the First Republic's re-Africanization policy. Thus, a Mande cultural renewal did begin, but not completely based on the mechanics of reading and writing established by the First Republic. Many Mande intellectuals have turned to N'ko to create universal literacy, thus reversing the colonial myth that Africans are ignorant and incapable of cultural production.

The growth of Mande identity has not been constrained by the legacy of European, artificially constructed, political borders. Although it is a fact that Mande speakers are physically divided by national borders, an emergent N'ko associated identity has to a large extent provided cultural wealth and access to world knowledge for Mande language speakers of the diaspora. The N'ko movement underlies an important transnational process through which the complexity of Mande Identity can be understood.

The Mande intellectual Souleymane Kanté, even after his death, stands squarely in this effort to exorcise European cultural domination. Although Sékou Touré rebuffed Kanté's offer of literacy through N'ko, speakers of Mande languages have continued to join the transnational, grassroots literacy movement. From 1949 to 1986 occurs the period of individual initiative when teachers and students spread the alphabet across West Africa. Mande speakers voluntarily learned N'ko literacy without formal schooling for the purpose of self edification. In 1986 began the period of ICRA-N'KO, a formal NGO, who embarked upon an N'ko literacy campaign to speed up the acquisition of literacy. Today, ICRA-N'KO continues its leadership role trying to re-unite Mande speakers culturally within a vast area of West Africa.

Although ICRA-N'KO has been unsuccessful in gaining financial support, it has been successful in publishing texts and collecting statistics. ICRA-N'KO has been working with publishers. Under the direction of M. Baba Mohamed Diané with support of countless followers of the N'ko movement, the complete works of Souleymane Kanté continue to be published. (See Appendix G for a complete list of publications.) So far there have been 74 titles totaling 284,300 books published in N'ko and



N'ko bookstore in
Conakry, Guinea.
Photograph by
D. White Oyler,
October 13, 1992.

distributed to the countries of Guinea, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Liberia with Guinea receiving the bulk of the books. Furthermore, since ICRA-N'KO has taken the lead, it requests a list of students from each teacher; these are then sent to the local ICRA-N'KO branch who compiles the totals and forwards them to the *Service National d'Alphabétisation* to be included in that year's literacy statistics. The numerical fragments show that the number of students has increased steadily from 1990 to 1995; however, it is not possible to say whether or not this is the result of more students or better record-keeping.

Since systematic record-keeping did not exist, I conducted a literacy survey of Kankan in 1994 which represents the first literacy statistics for that city. Canvassers interviewed each household about the languages spoken within and the alphabets which were used to transcribe those languages. The survey, however, did not address the number of children under age five, and its percentages are somewhat lower than actual rates of literacy. The 1992 government census for Kankan enumerated 130,231 people inhabiting the city. In my 1994 survey the aggregate number who were contacted was slightly more than 128,000. The results show that 14.1 percent of the population of Kankan could read and write French;

8.5 percent could read and write Arabic in Arabic script; 3.1 percent could read and write in the *Langue Nationale* which is the Maninka language written in the Roman alphabet; and 8.8 percent could read and write N'ko. (See Appendix E.) The literacy survey of Kankan which I conducted in the summer of 2000 was more comprehensive; it was devised to account for the omissions of the previous instrument (Appendix F).⁷ This data gives a more accurate assessment of N'ko literacy for the city of Kankan. In a sample population of 59,167 respondents, the results show that for those Kankanaïs surveyed 42.5 percent could read and write French; 19.7 percent could read and write Arabic in Arabic script; 2.5 percent could read and write in the *Langue Nationale*; and 20.7 percent could read and write the Maninka language written in N'ko.

A personal choice

Mande speakers have often emphasized that their motivation for acquiring literacy in N'ko is to improve their access to cultural knowledge. Old and young alike have supported the alphabet they offer because it is a script specifically designed to write the Mande languages; they add that they would have learned it for that reason alone. Knowing and using N'ko, it seems, offers dignity to Mande speakers, thus increasing self-esteem. N'ko has validated the individual proselyte by allowing control over knowledge. According to one informant, "without culture you have nothing."⁸ Informants themselves assert that N'ko has given them greater stature among other cultures. It is evident to me that language has always played an important role in Mande culture. Another informant claims that knowledge of N'ko helped Mande-speaking Liberians communicate with their distant parents in Francophone countries. Liberians, English speakers who did not know French, communicated initially by writing Mande in Arabic and later in the N'ko alphabet.⁹ Furthermore, the alphabet has enabled Mande speakers to record their own thoughts, local practices, histories, and literature with a clarity and precision not evident in foreign scripts. Thus, they have recorded family histories, agricultural techniques used by their forefathers, and also their mothers' home remedies.¹⁰ Currently in Kankan people can compete for an important post if they know one of the following writing systems: French, Arabic, or N'ko.¹¹

With regard to knowledge of religious matters, the methodology by which Arabic texts were memorized promoted participation in the liturgy, but it often thwarted understanding by obscuring the meaning of the texts being memorized. Older male learners had to be tutored by younger ones to recall the words that they had acquired by rote memory using mnemonic devices. Furthermore, women who had never received more

than words for the prayers taught in Quranic school were denied comprehensive access to religious knowledge. Women interviewed appreciated their newly found ability to read and understand the Quran.¹² Even Arabic-speaking speakers of Mande languages say they prefer to read the Quran in their native tongue.

Acquiring other forms of knowledge also has become important to Mande speakers. Many women have regarded N'ko as their access to an education. Since Mande society still requires women to marry at puberty, many women, especially those in the rural areas, have acquired only a rudimentary level education. By commanding N'ko, women have learned about their history, literature, science, and medicine because they can read the books of Souleymane Kanté. Women informants commented that in families where the husband had learned the alphabet, he always taught the wife. In situations where time limitations became critical, the husband might pay for his wife's instruction, and in a few cases, the wife attended an N'ko school and then taught her husband.¹³ Educated women are an asset because they can be business partners of their husbands or else become business women themselves; the family's standard of living is improved in both cases. As mothers, they can become an example to their children. One informant observed that he taught his wives N'ko so that they can help him in his medical practice. In this case one wife kept his office in Abidjan open while he was away; in another case the wife relayed information to her husband about business when he was traveling.¹⁴ Many of the women also ran their own businesses as did the women from Karifamoriah.¹⁵ For people interested in practicing the Mande healing arts, N'ko has been the only avenue to acquire that type of specific knowledge. In his travels Souleymane Kanté compiled the treatments and medicines used by many of the famous Mande healers. As noted earlier, he transcribed this information into N'ko and published it in his *Pharmacopeia* available to those who wished to become healers.¹⁶

Thus, infused with pride in their cultural identity and cultural heritage, Mande speakers have become motivated to recast their marginalized status imposed upon them by foreigners into something positive. They have sought the reproduction of information. The N'ko alphabet has created an enlightenment period for Mande languages whose cadre of N'ko intellectuals can now offer universal literacy in an autochthonous manner. N'ko literacy is the foundation of a larger transnational social movement by people who have felt ostracized by the cultural practices of colonial domination.

If, as Ngugi observes, cultural decolonization begins with the act of empowering one's own language, the speakers of Mande languages are

well under way. N'ko has become a first step in redefining themselves within an authentic African context in the modern world.

Notes

¹ David D. Laitin, *Language Repertoires and State Construction in Africa*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 43.

² Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, (South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey Publishers, Inc., 1987), p. 13.

³ Freire and Macedo, p. 118.

⁴ Freire and Macedo, p. 115.

⁵ Freire and Macedo, p. 117.

⁶ Laitin, p. 52.

⁷ Although the information to be collected in this survey was given anonymously, that is, no names and addresses requested, the research project was approved by the Human Subjects Research committee of Fayetteville State University, Fayetteville, North Carolina. My FSU colleagues John I. Brooks, III, Ph.D., and Andrew Dowdle, Ph.D., assisted. We constructed the instrument to include children under age five in order to show more concretely those individuals who could read and write in more than one alphabet; it focused more specifically on gender, age, and literacy. (See Appendixes E and F.)

⁸ Interview 70, July 18, 1993, in Conakry.

⁹ Interview 50, June 21, 1993, in Kankan.

¹⁰ Group interview 36, May 13, 1993, in Bankalan.

¹¹ One of the informants in group interview 24, April 12, 1993, in Kankan, related that he was the *Chef de Quartier* for Senkèfra and that he did all his written work in N'ko.

¹² Interview 63, July 14, 1993, in Conakry; interview 65, July 15, 1993, in Conakry; group interview 41, May 12, 1993, in Gbeleman; and group interview 67, July 17, 1993, in Conakry.

¹³ Interview 63, July 14, 1993, in Conakry, interview 57, June 25, 1993, in Karifamoriah, and interview 65, July 15, 1993, in Conakry.

¹⁴ Interview 49, June 20, 1993, in Kankan and group interview 57, June 25, 1993, in Karifamoriah.

¹⁵ Group interview 57, June 25, 1993, in Karifamoriah; interview 63, July 14, 1993, in Conakry; interview 65, July 15, 1993, in Conakry; and interview 71, July 18, 1993, in Conakry.

¹⁶ All of the following interviews are associated with Kanté's *Pharmacopeia*: interview 49, June 20, 1993, interview 56, June 24, 1993, group interview 45, June 17, 1993, in Kankan, and interview 62, July 14, 1993, in Conakry.

Appendices

Appendix A

Mande languages

In his Ph.D. dissertation (1986), Reed F. Stewart gave the following groupings as the selected classifications of Mande Languages which David Dalby determined in 1978.¹

Northern Mande

Azer
Barnbara
Bozo
Dyakhanka Dyalonka
Dyawara
Dyula
Huella
Kagoro
Khasonka
Kono
Konyanka
Kuranko
Lelé
Ligbi
Mandingo
Maninké [Maninka]
Marka
Mauka
Heula
San
Sembla
Sidyanka
Soninké
Susu
Khasonka
Vai
Wasulunka
Yalunka

Southeastern Mande

Ben Mwa
Tchanga
Bisa
Busa
Gba
Kwendré
Mano
Nwa
Tura Tougan-Samogo

Southwestern Mande

Gbandé
Gyo/Dan
Guerzé
Loko
Mendé

Near-eastern Mande

Bobofign/Sya

¹Reed F. Stewart, *Mande-speaking Peoples of West Africa: A Study of Culture Change along Language and Environmental Continua*, Ph.D. Dissertation, 1986, (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilm International, 1994), Appendix K, p. 367.

Appendix B

Informant relationships to Souleymane Kanté

Paternal family

Interview 26, April 26, 1993, in Soumankoyin-Kölönin.
Group interview 27, April 26, 1993, in Soumankoyin-Kölönin.
Group interview 52, June 22, 1993, in Djankana.
Interview 59, June 28, 1993, in Kankan.

Maternal family

Group interview 17, April 5, 1993, in Balandou.

Nuclear family

Interview 31, May 8, 1993, in Kankan.
Interview 51, June 22, 1993, in Djankana.
Interview 62, July 14, 1993, in Conakry.

Extended family

Interview 09, March 11, 1993, in Kankan.
Group interview 45, June 17, 1993, in Kankan.
Group interview 47, June 19, 1993, in Kankan.

Friends and supporters

Interview 05, March 3, 1993, in Kankan.
Interview 08, March 8, 1993, in Karifamoriah.
Group interview 18, April 5, 1993, in Balandou.
Interview 22, April 9, 1993, in Kankan.
Group interview 28, April 27, 1993, in Soumankoyin-Pöpökö.
Group interview 30, May 4, 1993, in Bamako.
Interview 32, May 8, 1993, in Kankan.
Interview 34, May 10, 1993, in Kankan.
Interview 68, July 17, 1993, in Conakry.
Interview 69, July 18, 1993, in Conakry.
Interview 84, August 15, 1994, in Abidjan.

Local observers

Interview 15, March 20, 1993, in Kankan.
Interview 31, May 8, 1993, in Kankan.
Interview 35, May 11, 1993, in Kankan.
Group interview 46, June 19, 1993, in Kankan.

Appendix B

Informant relationships to Souleymane Kanté [cont.]

Local observers [cont.]

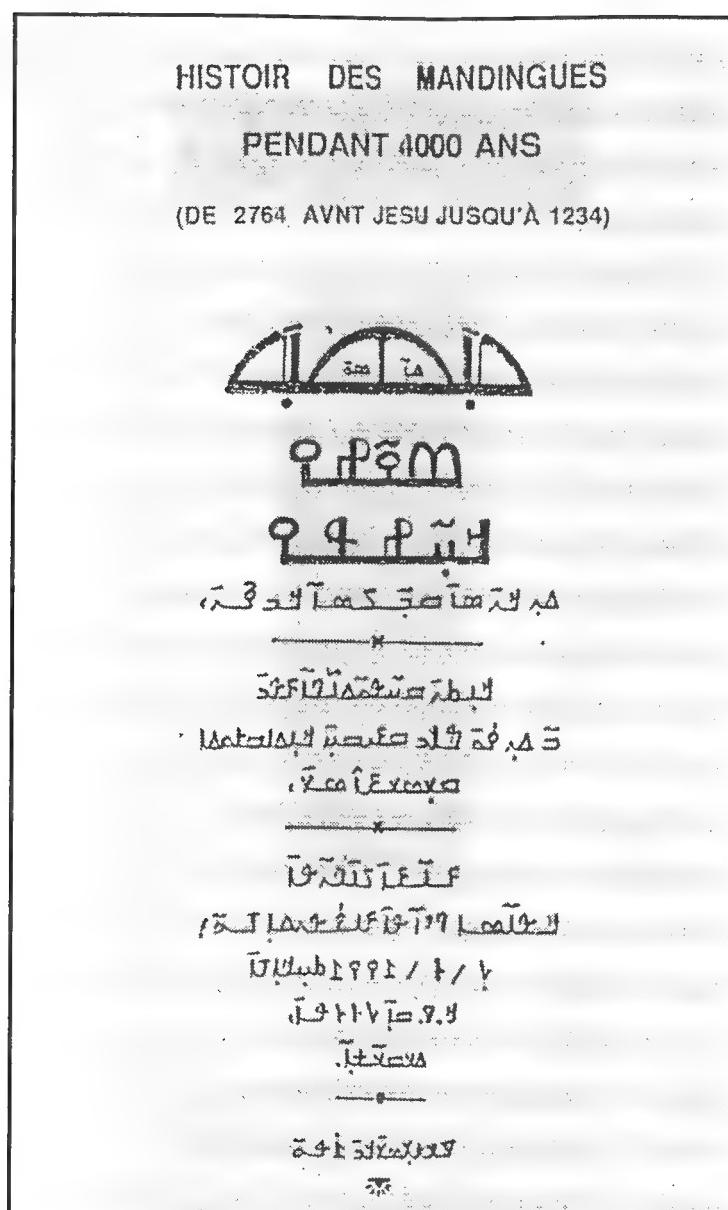
Interview 49, 1993, June 20, 1993, in Kankan.

Interview 70, July 18, 1993, in Conakry.

Interview 82, August 10, 1994, in Conakry.

Appendix C

N'ko documents



The title page of Souleymane Kanté's work, *History of the Manding for 4,000 years*, is written in French and the N'ko script.¹

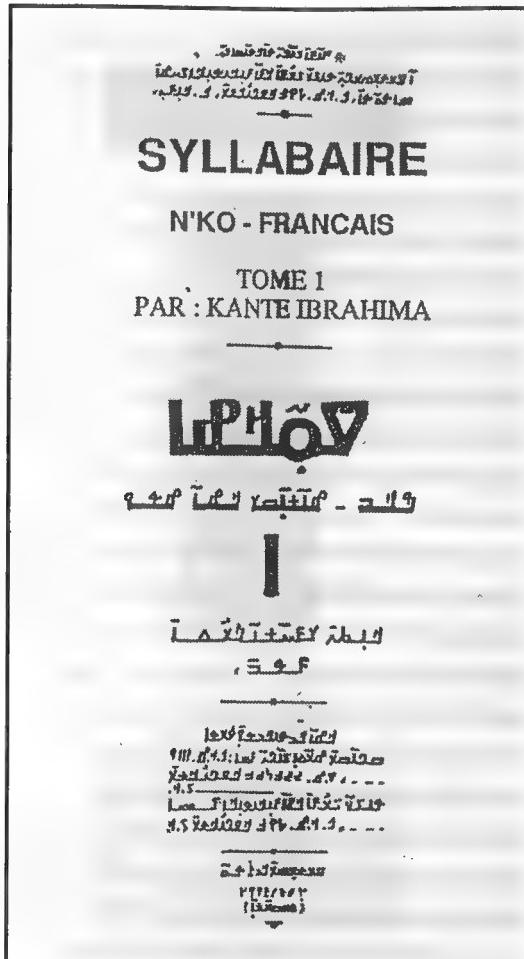
Appendix C N'ko documents [cont.]



As shown by this page from *History of the Manding for 4,000 years*, Kanté's text and map documented the geographical locales associated with the Manding.¹

Appendix C

N'ko documents [cont.]



Ibrahima Kanté, Soulemane Kanté's son, wrote this primer, *The N'ko Alphabet* in 199?. The title page is shown here. By definition, a syllabaire, or syllabary in English, is meant to show a set of symbols that represent or approximate the syllables of words. An alphasyllabary is a writing system made of graphemes that represent consonants with an inherent vowel that may be modified or omitted.²

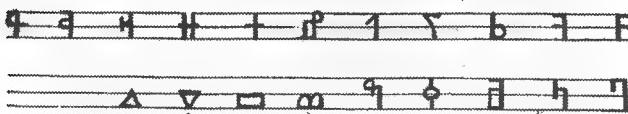
Appendix C N'ko documents [cont.]

۲۹۹۱ میلادی

t	B	1	7	b	7	F
R	D	Ty	Dy	T	P	B
ra	da	tya	dya	ta	pa	ba

△	♀	☿	♃	▽	□	Ӣ
M	L	K	F	GB	S	RR
-ma	la	ka	fa	gba	sa	rora

፩	፪	፫	፬	፭	፮
M'N'	y	w	h	n	ny
m'n'	ya	wa	ha	na	nya



The *N’ko Alphabet* by Ibrahima Kanté, consonants of the alphabet²

Appendix C

N'ko documents [cont.]

—r.
مکانیکی

ߑ	߱	߻	ߴ	߶	߸	߹	ߺ
Ӧ	Ӧ	ou	è	I	é	A	
ö	o	ou	è	i	é	a	

߻	߶	ߑ	ߴ	߹	߱	߸	߹
ou	i	ö	è	a	o		é

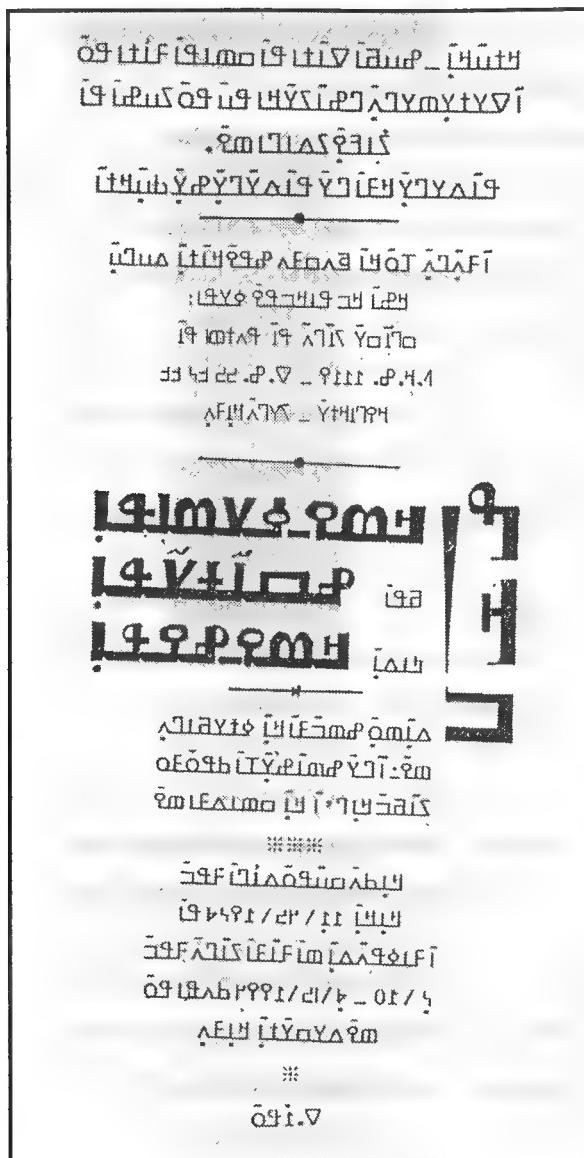
o	u	ߑ	ߴ	I	v	߶	߹
I	v	߱	ߴ	ߑ	߸	߹	߻
ߑ	ߴ	߻	߶	߱	߸	߹	v



The *N'ko Alphabet* by Ibrahima Kanté, vowels and numbers of the alphabet²

Appendix C

N'ko documents [cont.]



The N'ko title page of Souleymane Kante's *Dictionary*.
The volume contains definitions for 32,500 words.³

Appendix C N'ko documents [cont.]

Premier dictionnaire N'KO constitué de 32.500 vocabulaires dans la langue la plus "commerciale" et la plus parlée au point de vue nombre de pays en Afrique de l'Ouest.

Langue de l'Empire du Mali ou Manden, le N'KO est actuellement composé de quatre dialectes distincts : Maninka - Bambara - Djula - Mandenko.

Cet ouvrage très riche et premier en son genre, vient combler une grande lacune dans un domaine tant social qu'indispensable et complexe qu'est la langue.

Souleymane Kante's *Dictionary*, the French title page. He included many words regarding commerce as spoken (used) in a number of West African countries. Four distinct dialects are listed as the basis for N'ko.³

Appendix C

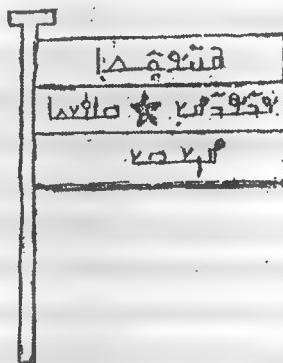
N'ko documents [cont.]

-61-

مَوْلَانَا مُحَمَّدْ يَسْعَى
فِي الْأَرْضِ

شَاهِدُ الْجَنَاحَيْنِ
شَاهِدُ الْمَلَائِكَةِ

شَاهِدُ الْأَنْبَاءِ



"Le Capitaine de l'Espérance au Bord du Vaisseau des Élites sur l'Océan des Lumières," a poem, written by Soulemany Kanté for the republic of Ghana's independence (title page from the handwritten work is shown).⁴

Appendix C

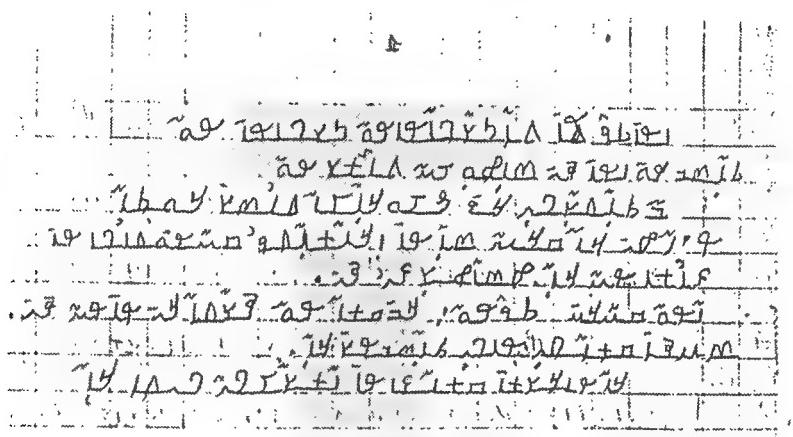
N'ko documents [cont.]

One page of text from the poem on the opposite page.

Appendix C

N'ko documents [cont.]

1. *Oral Tradition of the Founding of N'ko* is another example of a handwritten text by Soulemany Kanté. Excerpt, first of three pages.

A photograph of a page of handwritten text in N'ko script on white paper with blue horizontal ruling. The text is written in two columns. The first column contains approximately 10 lines of text, and the second column contains approximately 9 lines. The script is fluid and cursive, typical of handwritten manuscripts.

Oral Tradition of the Founding of N'ko is another example of a handwritten text by Soulemany Kanté. Excerpt, first of three pages.

Appendix C N'ko documents [cont.]

Oral Tradition of the Founding of N'ko, excerpt, second of three pages.⁵

Appendix C N'ko documents [cont.]

APPENDIX C

N'KO DOCUMENTS [CONT.]

ASTRONOMIE.

- 14 -

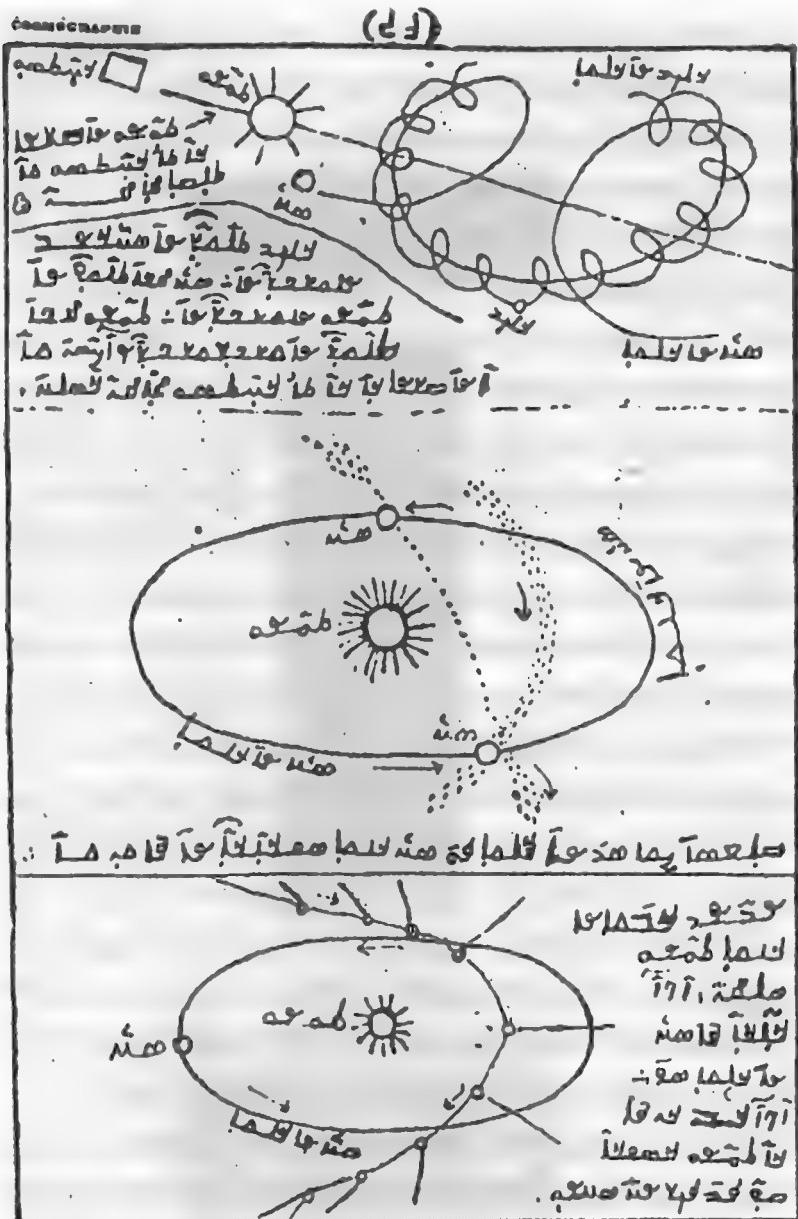
(20-7-261)

لِكُلِّ مَنْ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِأَعْلَمِ الْأَعْلَمَاتِ فَلَا يَقْرَأُهُ كُلُّ عَالَمٍ إِلَّا
يَقْرَأُهُ كُلُّ عَالَمٍ لِمَنْ يَعْلَمُ أَعْلَمَ الْأَعْلَمَاتِ فَلَا يَقْرَأُهُ كُلُّ عَالَمٍ إِلَّا
يَقْرَأُهُ كُلُّ عَالَمٍ لِمَنْ يَعْلَمُ أَعْلَمَ الْأَعْلَمَاتِ فَلَا يَقْرَأُهُ كُلُّ عَالَمٍ إِلَّا
يَقْرَأُهُ كُلُّ عَالَمٍ لِمَنْ يَعْلَمُ أَعْلَمَ الْأَعْلَمَاتِ فَلَا يَقْرَأُهُ كُلُّ عَالَمٍ إِلَّا
يَقْرَأُهُ كُلُّ عَالَمٍ لِمَنْ يَعْلَمُ أَعْلَمَ الْأَعْلَمَاتِ فَلَا يَقْرَأُهُ كُلُّ عَالَمٍ إِلَّا

(нѣ вѣ о зѣ бѣ)

Appendix C

N'ko documents [cont.]



An illustrated page from Kanté's *N'ko Science* astronomy (see previous page).⁶

Appendix C

N'ko documents [cont.]

Class roles for the N'ko school at Senkèfra, Kankan, Guinea, first of three pages.⁷

Appendix C N'ko documents [cont.]

Class roles for the N'ko school at Senkèfra, Kankan, Guinea (cont.).⁷

Appendix C N'ko documents [cont.]

Class roles for the N'ko school at Senkèfra, Kankan, Guinea (cont.).⁷

Notes

¹For further discussion refer to Chapter 4, page 93. I own a copy of the history of the Manding for 4000 years written in N'ko.

²See Chapter 4, page 94. I possess a copy of the first book of N'ko, N'ko Primers I and II, by Souleymane Kanté, the French-N'ko primer written by Ibrahim Kanté, Souleymane Kanté's son, and an N'ko dictionary.

³See above and Chapter 4, page 94.

⁴I have seen these texts. This is from the poem dedicated to Ghanaian independence.

⁵The text also contains a copy of a portion of the newly formed N'ko tradition.

⁶Although I have not seen the manuscripts of all the science related texts, I have a copy of a general science text. See Chapter 4, p. 95, first full paragraph for additional discussion.

⁷The private school in the Senkèfra *quartier* of Kankan received a building in 1990. This is a partial student class roll during the spring of 1993. See page Chapter 4, p. 104 for additional discussion.

Appendix D

The Souleymane Kanté epic

English Translation of the Souleymane Kanté Epic
 Oral Presentation March 11, 1993 in Kankan
 (Personal Interview 09)

Translated from the oral presentation in Maninka to French by
 Fodé Baba Condé, Research Assistant, 1993

Translated from French into English by
 Marie-Hélène McDurmon, Student, 1999

Fayetteville State University

In the name of the Compassionate and Merciful God...
 I dedicate this poem to the masterpiece of Karamo Solomana
 in the name of all African people. This poem is
 title, "There are two Rewards for Benefactors:
 the little rewards in the world are with the gratitude
 and the big rewards are from another world in the paradise."

- 1– Kanté Solomana, the inventor that God has given to the world
- 2– Foreseen son of Omar that God has given to Africa
- 3– The intellectual son of Djaka that has been helped by nobody to write his maternal language
- 4– Thanks to the young brother of Mary who has honored us.
- 5– The Lebanese said that our languages are not worthy.
- 6– Make do with the other languages because it's impossible to transcribe ours.
- 7– Africa has been ridiculed because we do not have a written language.

Appendix D

The Souleymane Kanté epic [cont.]

- 8– This challenge prevented Kanté from sleeping at night.
- 9– this night, the initiative to transcribe our languages was started.
- 10– The first attempt occurred in 1944.
- 11– The second in 1945.
- 12– The third in 1947.
- 13– The last attempt took place in 1949,
- 14– which resulted in the invention of N'ko and its popularity.
- 15– Since then until his death he took an interest in N'ko.
- 16– Kamal Marwa, who challenged, was ashamed.
- 17– Our languages are written down, now they must be learned.
- 18– If God wants, we will fight until our languages are recognized or well known.
- 19– He does not know that nothing happens before sunrise.
- 20– when this day arrived, God ordered Kanté for our writing.
- 21– God knew that we would succeed in realizing our language.
- 22– He refused gold and money to write our language.
- 23– Neither the sleepiness prevented him to do his researches.
- 24– The alphabet transcribes all languages, particularly African languages.
- 25– God gave this alphabet to Kanté who gave vision to Africa.
- 26– 40 years of fighting against obscurantism in Africa.

Appendix D

The Souleymane Kanté epic [cont.]

- 27– None of God's prophets thought about the happiness of this world.
- 28– Kanté Solomana thought of God's paradise, he did not want happiness from here on earth.
- 29– May God give him paradise, the best dwelling place.
- 30– His disciples bless that God gives him paradise.
- 31– The coma began on Saturday and the call was answered on Monday.
- 32– Beginning with deep drowsiness which finished with the grand departure.
- 33– His life ended in 1987.
- 34– Kanté Solomana is not here anymore, be courageous.
- 35– Fantas do not be afraid, look at the young brothers.
- 36– Fantas do not cry, look at the sons.
- 37– Mory Kanté abstain yourself, it's God's decision.
- 38– Students abstain yourselves, it is the last day of Kanté.
- 39– Parents abstain yourselves, it is the day of God.
- 40– When this day arrives, no one refuses death's call.
- 41– If man could, I would not accept his departure.
- 42– Because of our ties and the consideration that he had for me.
- 43– He loved me because of God's religion.

Appendix D

The Souleymane Kanté epic [cont.]

- 44– Thank you Kanté Solomana who gave his daughter to his pupil.
- 45– Who would make me think of him until his death.
- 46– My favorite wife, Kanté Kadia whose father is the Scholar of Africa.
- 47– I'm at your disposal day or night because of your father's recommendations.
- 48– Kandja Mady came to offer you his condolences.
- 49– Nafadji offered you his condolences because of the marriage which is connecting you.
- 50– The person in charge looks after the N'ko because of Kanté's efforts.
- 51– Look after the N'ko for an ulterior interest.
- 52– Students look after N'ko for the cause of your knowledge.
- 53– Help us Arabs because of the religion which is the basis of N'ko.
- 54– Help us UNESCO.
- 55– Africa! It's your alphabet, learn it.
- 56– y [unintelligible]
- 57– The doctor told him that his medicine would not heal his illness if he continued to write.
- 58– He answered that it happened because of his death.
- 59– I prefer to die than to stop writing.
- 60– Thanks, Kanté, you who offered his vision to Africa.

Appendix D

The Souleymane Kanté epic [cont.]

- 61– Your ophthalmologist told you of his astonishment, that he never saw.
- 62– Because you are 60 years old but your eyes appear 90 years old.
- 63– If you do not decrease reading and writing, you will end up blind.
- 64– I agree to be blind for the cause of Africa.
- 65– Everything happened as it had been said, you wore glasses.
- 66– And the worsening of the illness was followed by death.
- 67– Thanks Kanté Solomana, you who gave his life to Africa.

Appendix E

Literacy survey: Kankan, Republic of Guinea, August 4, 1994

Quartier	Official	Survey	N'ko alphabet		Arabic/Arabic		French/Roman	
	population	population	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
Total	130,231	128,075	7,937	3,354	7,557	3,348	11,223	6,724
Banankoroda	5,956	7,083	468	90	555	188	724	404
Briouquerie	5,353	5,256	220	183	73	81	674	378
Dalako	7,242	7,204	401	229	568	337	803	701
Dar es Salaam	6,215	6,625	476	38	526	180	868	622
Energie	6,243	5,431	194	60	409	186	480	278
Farako I	7,818	7,666	279	164	366	363	785	572
Farako II	7,393	7,501	231	108	951	431	658	414
Gare	5,305	5,145	358	88	627	107	615	282
Heremakono I	6,047	6,051	559	143	199	56	613	273
Heremakono II	5,826	6,328	286	89	471	119	460	139
Kabada I	5,866	6,391	336	246	108	49	226	239
Kabada II	6,186	6,336	351	137	212	138	691	548
Kankan-Coura	5,758	5,904	232	59	355	144	582	144
Korialen	5,111	5,425	196	78	265	133	429	144
Madina	5,017	4,553	432	208	136	23	267	163
Meteo	6,903	7,633	812	777	297	242	379	546
Missira	8,657	4,158	406	130	378	174	334	111
Salamanida	6,149	6,181	389	58	252	21	649	283
Senkéfra	5,722	5,943	372	94	207	88	264	123
Sogbe	5,809	5,598	519	243	293	214	410	284
Timbo	5,655	5,683	420	132	304	74	312	96

Note: The official population numbers are from the 1992 government census for Kankan. The literacy figures show those who write Maninka in the N'ko alphabet, those who write Arabic in the Arabic script, and those who write French in the Roman alphabet.

Appendix F

Literacy survey: Kankan, Republic of Guinea, July 8, 2000

Quartier	Survey population	N'ko alphabet		Arabic/Arabic		French/Roman	
		Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
Total	59,167	8,012	4,249	7,105	4,552	14,378	10,757
Banankoroda	3,950	248	78	323	162	837	650
Bordo*	2,115	807	768	574	585	509	437
Briqueterie	1,779	224	69	131	57	682	449
Dalako	3,008	822	378	570	429	759	547
Dar es Salaam	1,959	208	106	100	66	419	308
Energie	2,066	226	90	275	147	722	495
Farako I	2,285	119	24	158	120	652	470
Farako II	1,435	148	101	221	137	374	268
Gare	1,747	20	0	107	27	393	331
Heremakono I	1,887	320	201	259	150	500	413
Heremakono II	3,352	702	513	887	743	870	772
Kabada I	4,914	245	153	395	329	1,236	1,156
Kabada II	4,204	534	234	468	192	1,131	764
Kankan Koura	1,268	431	164	117	51	288	146
Korialen	2,921	134	95	132	72	573	413
Madina	1,428	158	79	96	37	312	164
Meteo	3,257	258	155	338	188	853	512
Missira I**	2,100	37	9	268	148	537	461
Missira II**	3,230	29	12	135	104	683	449
Salamani	3,700	737	333	234	94	577	447
Senkéfra	3,154	783	340	797	515	805	388
Sogbe	1,128	267	52	242	34	837	650
Timbo	2,280	555	295	278	165	450	391

Note: The literacy figures show those who write Maninka in the N'ko alphabet, those who write Arabic in the Arabic script, and those who write French in the Roman alphabet. *This quartier was not in the 1994 literacy survey. **In 1994 Missira was one quartier, rather than two.

Literacy survey methodology

Working under the assumption that a great number of Maninka speakers read and write the Maninka language using the N'ko alphabet, I initially sought to find statistics on the number of adults and children who actually knew and used the alphabet. However, after a thorough search of documents available at the *Service National d'Alphabétisation* and the Prefecture of Kankan, I learned there was no account of the sum total of adults and children who were literate in N'ko.

As a result, in 1994 I conducted a literacy study of the city of Kankan, the heart of the N'ko language, that became Kankan's first literacy survey. As the foundation for my literacy survey, I used the 1992 governmental census for the city that counted 130,231 residents. I then sought help from the ICRA-N'KO branch in Kankan to begin the data collection. Radio announcements informed the local public that members of ICRA-N'KO would proceed door to door recording the numbers of residents in each compound who could read and write in the following languages: French in Roman script, Arabic in Arabic script, the *Langue Nationale* (the Maninka language in Roman script of the Sékou Touré period), and N'ko in the script created by Souleymane Kanté.

The survey was anonymous—each household only was identified by its neighborhood or *quartier* and by a non-specific compound number. In addition, the survey was conducted within a 48 hour period by the canvassers. The survey offered the following results: (1) slightly more than 128,000 people were contacted; (2) 14.1 percent of Kankan's population canvassed could read and write in the French language; (3) 8.5 percent of Kankan's population could read and write Arabic in Arabic script; (4) 3.1 percent of Kankan's population could read and write in the *Langue Nationale*; (5) 8.8 percent of Kankan's population could read and write N'ko. (See Appendix E).

One important result of the literacy survey was that two local missionary groups, the Christian Missionary Association (CMA) and the Sudanic Mission (SIM), abandoned the practice of giving out bibles written in Maninka using the Roman alphabet and began the practice of supplying bibles in Maninka that used the N'ko script.

Although I tried to make the literacy survey as accurate as possible, one problem I encountered later was that I had only created fields for the numbers of males and females who could read and write. As a result, it was difficult to discern for the period covered (1) who can read and write more than one language and alphabet and (2) what

percentage of each compound was under age 5—that is, the numbers of children not yet able to read and write.

With the help of two colleagues at Fayetteville State University, Drs. John I. Brooks, III and Andrew Dowdle, I created a new instrument that (1) counted the number of children under age five, and (2) identified each individual (male and female) by age and by writing ability. In 2000 I returned to Kankan with the new survey that I believe reflects greater accuracy. The process was the same. Based on a sample population of 59,167 respondents, the 2000 literacy survey offered the following results: (1) 42.5 percent could read and write French; (2) 19.7 percent could read and write Arabic in Arabic script; (3) 2.5 percent could read and write in the *Langue Nationale*; (4) 20.7 percent could read and write the Maninka language in N'ko (See Appendix F). In order to finalize the 2000 Survey, however, I will have to assess at a future time the data of the 2002 governmental census for Kankan.

For all those who read N'ko, the pages that follow should be very helpful.

Appendix G

Books published in N'ko

	<u>Book title and language(s)</u>		<u>Author(s)</u>	<u>Number published</u> Reprints	<u>Date(s) of publication</u>
	N'ko	English			
1	Hate =	Truth	F. Souleymané Kanté*	10	15,000 01/28/1987, 05/20/1997
2	Gben = Kafa	Syllable Book	B. S. Kanté	1	3,000 02/05/1992
3	Konosansan = kono	The bird in cage	Baba M. Diané	11	35,000 01/28/1987, 10/25/1998
4	N'ko karan = Kafa 1	The N'ko Textbook 1	Baba M. Diané	11	35,000 01/28/1987, 10/25/1998
5	N'ko karan = Kafa 2	The N'ko Textbook 26	Baba M. Diané	11	33,500 01/28/1987, 03/05/1999
	Kangbening = Kafa 1	Grammar Book 1	Baba M. Diané	2	6,000 05/18/1988, 08/09/1993
7	Kangbening = Kafa 2	Grammar Book 2	Baba M. Diané	2	6,000 05/18/1988, 08/09/1993
8	Mantaaya Kafa 1	Orthography Book 1	Baba M. Diané	2	3,000 03/15/1990, 11/20/1998

Source: Baba Mohamed Diané, Publisher, Cairo, Egypt. Translated into English by Karamo K. Jammeh. *F. is for Fodé.

Appendix G

Books published in N'ko [cont.]

	<u>Book title and language(s)</u>		<u>Author(s)</u>	<u>Number published</u>		<u>Date(s) of publication</u>
	<u>N'ko</u>	<u>English</u>		<u>Reprints</u>	<u>Quantity</u>	
9	Mantaaya Kafa 2	Orthography Book 2	Baba M. Diané	2	3,000	03/15/1990, 05/10/1998
10	Kodofolan N'ko-N'ko	Dictionary N'ko-N'ko	F. Souleymané Kanté*	2	1,500	05/18/1998, 05/10/2000
11	Kodofolan Kanjamadi N'ko-N'ko	Dictionary Kanjamadi N'ko-N'ko	Baba M. Diané	2	1,500	05/18/1998, 05/10/2000
12	Kodofolan Kanjamadi French/Nko	Dictionary Kanjamadi French/Nko	Baba M. Diané	2	1,500	05/18/1998, 05/10/2000
13	Waaduu dofo batoma	The abstract History of Waaduu	F. Souleymané Kanté*	1	300	05/18/1998, 05/10/2000
14	Manden fodoba kang	The common language of Manden	F. Souleymané Kanté*	1	2,000	05/20/1997

Source: Baba Mohamed Diané, Publisher, Cairo, Egypt. Translated into English by Karamo K. Jammeh. *F. is for Fodé.

Appendix G

Books published in N'ko [cont.]

Book title and language(s) N'ko	Author(s)	Number Reprints	published Quantity	Date(s) of publication
				English
15 Soso Dofo Batoma	The abstract History of Soso F. Souleymané Kanté*	1	1,000	08/30/1998
16 Manden san 4000 dofo	The 4000 years history of Mande F. Souleymané Kanté*	1	1,500	07/05/1991
17 Mande dofo Sunjada tele	History of Manden in Sunjata Era F. Souleymané Kanté*	1	1,500	04/20/1997
18 Manden Dofo 3-4 kafanjang	The history of Manden 3rd-4th additions F. Souleymané Kanté*	1	1,500	10/05/1992
19 Samudugbe dofo dafanen	The complete History of Samori Toure F. Souleymané Kanté*	1	1,000	12/21/1999

Source: Baba Mohamed Diané, Publisher, Cairo, Egypt. Translated into English by Karamo K. Jammeh. *F. is for Fodé.

Appendix G

Books published in N'ko [cont.]

	<u>Book title and language(s)</u>	<u>Author(s)</u>	<u>Number published</u>	<u>Date(s) of publication</u>	
	N'ko	English	Reprints Quantity		
20	Alifa Yaya Dialo Dofo Dafanen	The complete History of Alifa Yaya Dialo	F. Souleymané Kanté*	1 1,000	12/21/1999
21	Sikaso keba Dofo Dafanen	The complete History of Sikaso Keba	F. Souleymané Kanté*	1 1,000	12/21/1999
22	Manden Kurundu Tonbolon	The 150 articles of Manden (Pentateuch)	F. Souleymané Kanté*	1 1,000	12/21/1999
23	Solomana Kanté la saya	The death of Soloman Kanté	Bé Ba Kaba	1 2,000	06/21/1993
24	Wankaradu Jamana	The nation of Wankaradu	Bé Ba Kaba	1 2,000	06/21/1993

Source: Baba Mohamed Diané, Publisher, Cairo, Egypt. Translated into English by Karamo K. Jammeh. *F. is for Fodé.

Appendix G

Books published in N'ko [cont.]

	<u>Book title and language(s)</u>		<u>Author(s)</u>	<u>Number published</u>		<u>Date(s) of publication</u>
	N'ko	English		Reprints	Quantity	
25	Manden Kurufaba n'a laminin	Manden territory and its surroundings	F. Souleymané Kanté*	1	1,000	11/08/1994
	Manden Si nyamama	Surnames of Manden families	F. Souleymané Kanté*	1	1,000	11/08/1994
	Bamabanna Dofo	The history about Bamana	F. Souleymané Kanté*	1	1,000	11/08/1994
	Songuay ni Manden te	Relation between Songuay and Manden	F. Souleymané Kanté*	1	1,000	11/08/1994
	Watara Man-Sala 2	The 2 kingdom of Watara	F. Souleymané Kanté*	1	1,000	11/08/1994

Source: Baba Mohamed Diané, Publisher, Cairo, Egypt. Translated into English by Karamo K. Jammeh. *F. is for Fodé.

Appendix G

Books published in N'ko [cont.]

<u>Book title and language(s)</u>	<u>Author(s)</u>	<u>Number published</u>	<u>Date(s) of publication</u>	
<u>N'ko</u>	<u>English</u>	<u>Reprints</u>	<u>Quantity</u>	
Fula lu Futajalon nasodonya	How the Fulas immigrated to Futajalon	F. Souleymané Kanté*	1 1,000	11/08/1994
Saralon Dofo batomon	The abstract History of Sierra Leone	F. Souleymané Kanté*	1 1,000	11/08/1994
Folonningbe ^a Dofo	History of Folonningbe ^a	F. Souleymané Kanté*	1 1,000	11/08/1994
Moosiduu Dofo	History of Moosi Land	F. Souleymané Kanté*	1 1,000	11/08/1994
Hawusadu Dofo	History of Hawusa land	F. Souleymané Kanté*	1 1,000	11/08/1994
26 Yahudu Dofo	The history of Jews people	Seedu Keita	1...	...

^aFolonningbe is translated as "region."

...Not given/unknown.

Source: Baba Mohamed Diane, Publisher, Cairo, Egypt. Translated into English by Karamo K. Jammeh. *F. is for Fodé.

Appendix G

Books published in N'ko [cont.]

	<u>Book title and language(s)</u>		<u>Author(s)</u>	<u>Number published</u>		<u>Date(s) of publication</u>
	<u>N'ko</u>	<u>English</u>		<u>Reprints</u>	<u>Quantity</u>	
27	Kurana = Nkolama	The Qur'an in Nko script	F. Souleymané Kanté*	1	1,000	10/08/1994
28	Kurana I = Arabu/Nko	The Qur'an Arabic/Nko	F. Souleymané and Baba M. Diané	10	100	02/08/1998
29	Kurana 2 = Arabu/Nko	The Qur'an Arabic/Nko	F. Souleymané and Baba M. Diané	2	50, 000	02/08/1999
30	Kurana = Fasari Ianooya Nko/Nko	Simplify the translation of Quran Nko-Nko	Baba M. Diané	2	500	12/25/1999
31	Salisura = Arabu & N'ko	Chapter of Prayer Arabic and N'ko	Baba M. Diané	1	1,500	04/29/1995

...Not given/unknown.

Source: Baba Mohamed Diane, Publisher, Cairo, Egypt. Translated into English by Karamo K. Jammeh. *F. is for Fodé.

Appendix G

Books published in N'ko [cont.]

	<u>Book title and language(s)</u>		<u>Author(s)</u>	<u>Number published</u>		<u>Date(s) of publication</u>
	<u>N'ko</u>	<u>English</u>		<u>Reprints</u>	<u>Quantity</u>	
32	Silama = Semben Kelaba Tondama	True faith in Islam as real Muslim	F. Souleymané Kanté*	2	2,000	.../.../1993, 03/2000
33	Silamaden = kandalan	Guard angel of muslim	Ma Kaba	1	200	.../.../1993
34	Dahanen = Ni tanama Silamaya Kono	The Licit and Illicit rules in Islam	Baba M. Diané	1	2,050	03/02/1998
35	Silamaya = Nyalon Jona kafa 1	Knowing Islam in early stage book 1	F. Souleymané Kanté*	3	1,500	.../.../1990, 04/22/1993

...Not given/unknown.

Source: Baba Mohamed Diane, Publisher, Cairo, Egypt. Translated into English by Karamo K. Jammeh.*F. is for Fodé.

Appendix G

Books published in N'ko [cont.]

Book title and language(s) N'ko	Author(s)	Number published Reprints	Date(s) of publication	Number published Quantity	
				English	
36 Silamaya = Nyalon Jona kafa 2	Knowing Islam in early stagebook 2	F. Souleymané Kanté*	3	1,500	.../.../1990, 04/22/1993
37 Silamaya = Nyalon Jona kafa 3	Knowing Islam in early stagebook 3	F. Souleymané Kanté*	3	1,500	.../.../1990, 04/22/1993
38 Alifatiha = Karanko Salilo bee	The obligation of reading Alifatiha in all prayers	F. Souleymané Kanté*	3	10,000	.../.../1979, 11/17/1994
Karanta = ni Misiri	Quranic School and Mosque	F. Souleymané Kanté*			
39 Fudu = Sariya Kiti	Matrimonial Laws of Islam	F. Souleymané Kanté*	1	1,500	01/08/1995

...Not given/unknown.

Source: Baba Mohamed Diane, Publisher, Cairo, Egypt. Translated into English by Karamo K. Jammeh. *F. is for Fodé.

Appendix G

Books published in N'ko [cont.]

	<u>Book title and language(s)</u>		<u>Author(s)</u>	<u>Number published</u>		<u>Date(s) of publication</u>
	<u>N'ko</u>	<u>English</u>		<u>Reprints</u>	<u>Quantity</u>	
40	Suna = donko lu tasila Baju	The genesis of the principle of Sunnism = religious sect	...	...	...	...
41	Linjiil= ni taurati Tunyaya	The Affirma- tion of the New and Old testaments	Baba M. Diané	1	1,000	07/20/1997
42	Tuma = Molonmaya	The value of Time	Baba M. Diané	...	...	...
43	Silamaya = tunkun nu	The Pillars of Islam	Baba M. Diané	1	2,000	10/23/1997
44	Silamaya = Pedeku lere 1	Encyclopedic of Islam volume 1	Baba M. Diané	1	1,000	02/06/1999

...Not given/unknown.

Source: Baba Mohamed Diane, Publisher, Cairo, Egypt. Translated into English by Karamo K. Jammeh.

Appendix G

Books published in N'ko [cont.]

	<u>Book title and language(s)</u>		<u>Author(s)</u>	<u>Number published</u>		<u>Date(s) of publication</u>
	<u>N'ko</u>	<u>English</u>		<u>Reprints</u>	<u>Quantity</u>	
45	Silamaya Pedeku lere 2	Encyclopedic of Islam volume 2	Baba M. Diané	1	1,000	02/06/1999
46	Silamaya = Pedeku lere 3	Encyclopedic of Islam volume 3	Baba M. Diané	1	1,000	02/06/1999
47	Hiji ni = Umra konya lu	About annual Pilgrimage (to Saudia)	Baba M. Diané	1	96	02/06/1999
48	Dadofara- = ranyooya	Dialectic Analysis	Baba M. Diané	1	50	07/28/1997
49	Baju saba = Sonomedoya	Three solid bases of faith	Baba M. Diané	1	...	...
50	Fadafinna = Denba lu lali kan	Enlightening African women about maternity	F. Souleymané Kanté*	4	5,000	07/28/1997

...Not given/unknown.

Source: Baba Mohamed Diane, Publisher, Cairo, Egypt. Translated into English by Karamo K. Jammeh. *F. is for Fodé.

Appendix G

Books published in N'ko [cont.]

	<u>Book title and language(s)</u> N'ko	<u>Author(s)</u>	<u>Number published</u> Reprints	<u>Date(s) of publication</u>
	<u>Book title and language(s)</u> English		<u>Quantity</u>	
	Den Masede = Breast feeding ni konota and the best matanka way to avoid nya nyima pregnancy (Contraceptive)	F. Souleymané Kanté*	4	5,000 07/28/1997
51	Jidi kenya = ladesenen	Family planning	F. Souleymané Kanté*	3 3,000 06/09/1990
52	Jidi nya = lon jona	Early enlighten- ment on family planning	N. M Keta	.........
53	Jiimafa = Somono	Admiral officer of Navy	F. Souleymané Kanté*	1 3,000 06/22/1993
54	Saya la mone = donen te banbo la	The frustration caused by death never ceases (proverb)	F. Kar Bereté	3 3,000 06/22/1993

...Not given/unknown.

Source: Baba Mohamed Diane, Publisher, Cairo, Egypt. Translated into English by Karamo K. Jammeh. *F. is for Fodé.

Appendix G

Books published in N'ko [cont.]

Book title and language(s) N'ko	Author(s)	Number published		Date(s) of publication
		Reprints	Quantity	
55 Jedelon = Kafesa solon di	It is worth to know yourself than home (proverb)	Ama Koroma	1	...
56 Jibiriba = Fasa	Old Myth in novel	F. Souleymané Kanté*	3	11,000
57 Nyima = sara le fisa, a yere di	Reward for Kindness is worth than itself (proverb)	F. Souleymané Kanté*	3	2,000
58 Toli ni = Siri	Fairy tale and Story	Karamo K. Jammeh	1	500
59 Manden = yirikali damina	Genesis of Manden's arithmetic	F. Souleymané Kanté*	...	...

...Not given/unknown.

Source: Baba Mohamed Diane, Publisher, Cairo, Egypt. Translated into English by Karamo K. Jammeh. *F. is for Fodé.

Appendix G

Books published in N'ko [cont.]

	<u>Book title and language(s)</u> N'ko	<u>Author(s)</u>	<u>Number published</u>		<u>Date(s) of publication</u>
			Reprints	Quantity	
60	Dee la = fee n,a tinye ko	Public prop- erty and what makes it spoil	F. S. Kanteh	...	...
61	Jama do = belennan ni fodoba tinki	Public speech and general blessing	F. Souleymané Kanté*	2	2,000 07/10/1993
62	Lanfiya Kuyate	Lanfiya Kuyate's (biography)	Bé Ba Kaba	1	... 10/07/1991
63	Nko ko = wedewede	The Philo- sophy of N'ko	Baba M. Diané	1	1,000 01/01/1997
64	Kelenna- = Bila Kandogbe	Philosophical novel (K.K)	F. Souleymané Kanté*	3	... ...

...Not given/unknown.

Source: Baba Mohamed Diane, Publisher, Cairo, Egypt. Translated into English by Karamo K. Jammeh. *F. is for Fodé.

Appendix G

Books published in N'ko [cont.]

Book title and language(s) N'ko	Author(s)	Number published		Date(s) of publication
		Reprints	Quantity	
65 Valinten = Vridin	Valinten Vridin	Valinten Vridin Baba M. Diané	1...	...
66 Nko dalu = Kende	The Main Advantage of N'ko	F. Souleymané Kanté*	1 2,000	.../.../1985, 12/23/1988
67 Sodon = bedebeli	Economic policy	F. Souleymané Kanté*	1 2,000	09/03/1993
68 Faransi = Kan fo La lu la Nyoonye	Common- wealth meeting of French speak- ing Nations	Bé Ba Kaba	1 1,000	09/19/1992
69 Yelen = Karo La te	Monthly newspape (every 2 months)	Baba M. Diané	15 15,000	.../.../1992, ..../.../2001

...Not given/unknown.

Source: Baba Mohamed Diane, Publisher, Cairo, Egypt. Translated into English by Karamo K. Jammeh. *F. is for Fodé.

Appendix G

Books published in N'ko [cont.]

	<u>Book title and language(s)</u>		<u>Author(s)</u>	<u>Number published</u>		<u>Date(s) of publication</u>
	N'ko	English		Reprints	Quantity	
70	Doodo lu = Mankutu	The Globules and their purpose	...	...	...	...
71	Damalon = Kafa 1	Mathematics book 1	Baba M. Diané	1	...	...
72	Damalon = Kafa 2	Mathematics book 2	Baba M. Diané	1	...	...
73	Jede = Korosi	Looking after yourself	Baba M. Diané	1	...	...
74	Fudusa- badoya =	Geometry	Baba M. Diané	1	...	...

...Not given/unknown.

Source: Baba Mohamed Diane, Publisher, Cairo, Egypt. Translated into English by Karamo K. Jammeh.

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Dianne White Oyler speaks English, French, and Maninka. She also is the author of numerous articles published in academic journals.

Africana Homestead Legacy Publishers In Print and Forthcoming Titles

Governance, Democracy, and Development in Sub-Saharan Africa, James S. Guseh and Emmanuel O. Oritsejafor, ISBN-13: 978-0-9770904-3-3, ISBN-10: 0-9770904-3-4, forthcoming 2006.

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Visions of Black Life: A Collection of Outstanding Short Stories and Poetry, Volume I May 2005, ISSN 1556-2190 (annual serial), ISBN-13: 978-0-09653308-6-2, ISBN-10: 0-9653308-6-2.

Learning English the Cultural Way, Gail A. Mitchell, ISBN-10: 0-9653308-9-3, August 2004. (Recommended reading for age 10 years and up.)

United States Policy Towards Liberia 1822 to 2003: Unintended Consequences? Lester S. Hyman, ISBN-10: 0-9653308-8-5, August 2003.

American Democracy in Africa in the Twenty-First Century? Edward Lama Wonkeryor, Ella Forbes, James S. Guseh, and George Klay Kieh, Jr., ISBN-10: 0-9653308-2-6, December 2000.

But We Have No Country: The 1851 Christiana, Pennsylvania Resistance, Ella Forbes, ISBN-10: 0-9653308-1-8, November 1998.

Dedicated to Music: The Legacy of African-American Church Musicians and Music Teachers in Southern, New Jersey, 1915-1990, Henrietta

Fuller Robinson (deceased) and Carolyn Cordelia Williams, with an introduction by Clement Alexander Price, ISBN-10: 0-9653308-4-2, July 1997.



In her seminal work Dianne White Oyler discusses the creation of the N'ko alphabet, based on the Maninka language, by Souleymane Kanté (1922-1987) in 1949 in Haute Guinée (Guinea). She carefully documents N'ko's dissemination by a grassroots literacy campaign that started with Kanté and continues to the present and shows how important the language is in the evolution of cultural nationalism of the Mande-speaking people of West Africa, and Kanté's and Nko's relationship to pan-Africanism.

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Dianne White Oyler speaks English, French, and Maninka. Her numerous articles on N'ko and other subjects are published in various academic journals.

Oyler's study of the N'ko language has been helped by her observation participation approach, use of documents produced by home based-African scholars, and her close collaboration with the producers and teachers of the N'ko, who rightly perceive her as their cultural ambassador. Her revelation of the hidden cultural transcript of the Mandenka will help the students of Africa's social and oral history. The Guinean people ... mostly familiar with the postcolonial leaders' public transcript will benefit ... as well. — N'Daou, Saidou Mohamed, former National Deputy Director for Higher Education (Guinea, West Africa), Associate Professor of History, Chicago State University

Oyler shows that efforts by Mande-speaking West Africans to substitute N'ko, an indigenous alphabet, for the current Western system heralds the onset of a movement ... likely to become a major aspect of cultural nationalism. Oyler's work is the first effort to alert, inform, and stimulate future research on Mande cultural nationalism in West Africa and similar phenomena throughout Africa. — Richard A. Corby, Professor of History, University of Arkansas at Monticello



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